



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 07486625 6

The Three Graces



BY

"THE DUCHESS"

114



J. G. I.
Compliments
H.B.

H
—

NC

Other Novels by the Duchess.

12mo. Cloth, \$1.00; Paper, 50 cents.

LADY PATTY.

THE HOYDEN.

A LITTLE IRISH GIRL.

Bound only in Cloth, \$1.00.

HON. MRS. VEREKER.

PORTIA.

MARVEL.

ROSSMOYNE.

THE DUCHESS.

UNDER-CURRENTS.

A MODERN CIRCE.

A LIFE'S REMORSE.

MOLLY BAWN.

BEAUTY'S DAUGHTERS.

LADY VALWORTH'S DIAMONDS.

FAITH AND UNFAITH.

MRS. GREGORY.

AIRY FAIRY LILIAN.

JERRY, and OTHER STORIES.

IN DURANCE VILE.

A MENTAL STRUGGLE.

DORIS.

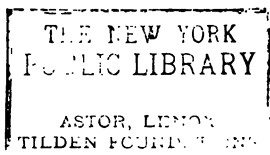
LADY BRANKSMERE.

PHYLLIS.

"O TENDER DOLORES."

LOYS, LORD BERRESFORD.

A MAIDEN ALL FORLORN.





"AUNTIE, WHERE ARE YOU?"

(Page 12.)

THE THREE GRACES

A NOVEL

BY

THE DUCHESS, *peer of*

Author of "Phyllis," "Molly Bawn,"
"Airy Fairy Lilian," "The Hoyden," etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MARIA L. KIRK

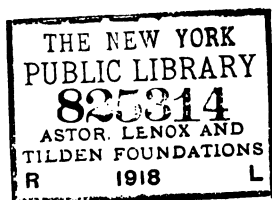
"For lo! the wished day is come at last,
That shall, for all the pains and sorrows past,
Pay to her usury of long delight"

SPENSER

PHILADELPHIA

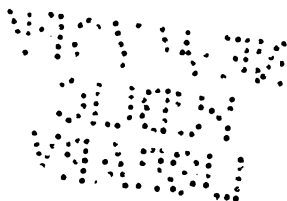
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY

1895



COPYRIGHT, 1895,
BY
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY.

PRINTED BY J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY, PHILADELPHIA, U.S.A.



THE THREE GRACES.

CHAPTER I.

"Come near: I fare the better far
For the sweet food of thy divine advice.
Let no man value at a little price
A virtuous woman's counsel."

"HENRIETTA! Henrietta!" roars the Squire. The afternoon post has just come in and with it a telegram. It had arrived in the village as the rural postman was going on his rounds, and it had seemed to the postmaster a wise and economical thing to send it up by him to "The Court."

"Well?" says Mrs. Egerton, putting her handsome head in at the door of the Squire's den. "Is the house on fire?" She is laughing and lifting her brows a little as if in protest at his loud call,—a charming woman, who at thirty-five (two years ago) had found herself a widow with happily few things to regret behind her. She is the Squire's sister-in-law and his right hand, the youngest and now only living sister of his dead

wife, and very like what that wife had been when the Squire married her some twenty-two years ago.

"No, no; but here's a telegram; and what it means—— Come in, can't you? and shut the door."

"A telegram? Nobody ill?"

"Too much alive, rather. It's from my cousin, O'Grady of Ballyclash. Haven't heard from him for twenty years, I think; not since poor Bertha——", he sighs as he mentions his dead wife's name. He always sighs, indeed, when he speaks it, having never ceased to regret her. She had been the one thing beloved to adoration by his rough, irritable nature. "Not since my poor sweetheart and I went there once on a visit. She took a great fancy to him and to the children, and he to her."

"Ah, he would," says Mrs. Egerton, who is looking grave, too. She had been a mere growing girl when Bertha died, but she had remembered that sweet creature always; few who knew her ever forgot. "Well! and the telegram?"

"It is to say he is sending us over one of his girls to stay with us, on a visit, I suppose. As if we hadn't enough girls round here already. There, read it." He pushes the telegram towards her across the table. It is certainly very vague.

"Am sending on Betty by next boat. To-morrow will arrive. Sure of welcome. Old friends. Cousins. Letter follows. O'GRADY."

"Why couldn't letter have come first?" says Mrs. Egerton, very reasonably, it must be allowed.

"That's what I want to know. But it's just like these Irish people, always in such a dev—beg pardon—beast of a hurry. But now, Henrietta, what do you think of it?"

"What *can* I think, but that your cousin is sending you one of his girls on a visit, in all good faith. You say there was a friendship between you and him and your wife in former times: he is counting on that, no doubt. Of course I knew little of them. Mr. O'Grady is well off?"

"About the richest man in his county, which is, I think, Tipperary. But what he's sending Betty,—that's the name, isn't it?" peering at the telegram—"here for, I can't imagine."

"Perhaps she has got into a scrape," says Mrs. Egerton, unguardedly.

"Scrape! scrape! Good heavens, Henrietta, what do you mean? If I found that was so, I'd send her back by next——"

"Telegraph wire," says Mrs. Egerton, laughing. "My dear John, that's the merest supposition of mine,—a bare suggestion. Your own suggestion is much better worthy of notice,—that these Irish cousins of yours are so impulsive, so Irish, that having once got the idea into their heads of send-

ing the girl to you—with the view probably of knowing her cousins—they acted on it forthwith.”

“I don’t believe a word of it,” says the Squire, getting up and walking backwards and forwards, his hands crossed behind his back and his coat-tails high in the air.

“Well, then,” says kind-hearted Mrs. Egerton, quite upset by the hurricane she has raised, “the poor child—poor dear little Betty!—(I’m sure she is small and pale)—may be very ill, and the doctor may have ordered her off to the south of England at a moment’s notice. You know what beautiful air we have here, John; and this lovely June weather is so exhilarating, so calculated to breathe health and strength even into the most diseased lungs, that probably the doctors over there thought of it, and then they thought of you—and—and then, of course, came in the impulsiveness you spoke of, and off the dear girl was sent. She’ll be here—let me see—to-morrow about——”

“Seven,” says the Squire.

“Five, I should have thought.”

“No, seven. I suppose I had better send the carriage to the train to meet her?”

“Certainly; but don’t you think it is five?”

“No, I don’t,” shortly. “One would think, Henrietta, I hadn’t lived here all my life. There are two trains. Only the very smartest

man could catch the one that comes here at five, and she's only a girl."

"Really, John, for a father of three girls, you speak very contemptuously," says Mrs. Egerton. "Girls aren't to be despised, I can tell you. Your own wife was a girl once, remember,—and so was I." She draws herself up, and then smiles charmingly. Poor old cross John, what's the good of fighting with him, but she does wish he wasn't so stupidly severe about the girls—his daughters. "For one thing," says she, "I think Madge is now quite old enough to be consulted in a small matter like this."

"Madge! a baby of eighteen."

"I never heard of a baby of eighteen," says Madge's aunt, calmly. "And you ought to consider, John, that she is in a way your eldest girl."

"My eldest girl! She is *not*," says the Squire, with sudden sharpness.

"To all intents and purposes she is."

"No, no." A spasm of pain crosses the Squire's brow.

"But yes, yes. I can't bear to say it, but Vincent——"

"I will have no one put over her head," says Mr. Grace with such sudden, sharp anger that even Mrs. Egerton, who has a great spirit of her own, goes down before it.

"Very well," says she. "But for goodness'

sake keep your temper, and let us get back to the original trouble, as you won't have Madge to help you."

"All girls are fools," says the Squire, sententially.

"I wonder you don't say all women," says Mrs. Egerton, who is feeling a little annoyed. "So this girl is coming to you to-morrow? Well, according to your views, better than a boy, anyway. You know how you hate your own sex." She picks up the telegram and reads it again.

"Very ambiguous," says she. "Not a word as to Betty's morals. I wonder you aren't frightened. But, of course, as she isn't a boy!—Anyway, John, you must tell the girls. Their cousin, you know! and a room to be prepared."

"I'm busy. You tell them," says the Squire, turning to his writing-table. "Sorry," sarcastically, "you can't give them more joyful news,—a Harry rather than a Betty would be more congenial to them."

"And very naturally, too," says Mrs. Egerton. "When I was a girl—and I don't mind saying now I was an excellent one—a Jack before a Gill for me any day."

"I hope," stiffly, "you will not inculcate your pieces with these doctrines."

"Oh! John, what a prig you are," says Mrs. Egerton, with her prettiest smile. "Why don't

you wake out of your morbid dreamings and see what sweet and natural girls your own daughters are."

"I know, I know—good girls, no doubt," says the Squire. "My sweetheart's children could hardly be less!" He generally alludes to his dead wife as his "Sweetheart,"—a term so heart-felt and so earnest, that never has it drawn one amused smile from his neighbours round him,—for, in spite of his eccentricities and his decidedly nasty temper, he had been a most true and devoted husband to her to her short life's end.

He had been fussy and irritable and very one-minded about most things all through his life, and probably will be so to the end, but to her whom he had loved with all his soul he was never irritable, never anything but loving and kind and gracious; and she had known and felt the difference he had placed between her and all the rest of the world, and loved him the more for it, and had died in his arms as happily as one can die who leaves a husband, half frenzied for her loss, and three small girls behind her.

All his tender hold of her could not keep her back, however, and he buried her, silently, tearlessly—so tearlessly that the neighbours looking on said his heart was a stone. But it was only broken!

"Why are you so hard on them, then?" continues Mrs. Egerton, who during her two years

with them—the two years of her widowhood—has grown to love the girls very honestly. “I think them the best girls in the world, considering how beautiful they are. Ugly girls,” says Mrs. Egerton, thoughtfully, “are—well, they of *course* are good—or ought to be. But yours—Bertha’s——”

“I know. I see. It is because they are beautiful, I must look after Bertha’s children,” says Grace in the low voice he always instinctively falls into when the love of his life is alluded to.

“But do you look after them? Is your way a wise one? You forbid them practically to see any man, of any sort. And is that wise?”

“You wrong me there, Henrietta: they can see men, of sorts—everywhere. What I do object to is young men pervading the premises morning, noon, and night. My poor girl,” with another sigh, “has left me these girls as her sole living memory of herself, and I feel bound to see they are kept out of mischief.”

“That is very well as far as it goes. But surely Bertha would not wish to see her daughters nuns.”

“Nuns! God forbid!” says the Squire, who is a staunch Protestant. “But neither would she wish to see them married into poverty. And therefore I have set my face against their seeing any of these impecunious young men round here.”

"Well, there I quite agree with you," says Mrs. Egerton. "None of the girls were meant for that sort of thing to judge by their ways—their looks. But all young men are not paupers and vagrants. There is Victor, for example."

"Victor Mowbray! A mere dependent on his uncle."

"And heir to the title!"

"A barren honour! All the money goes to the other nephew, that disreputable Paul Swindon."

"Ah! that is what they say; but Lord Mowbray would surely not be so stupid as to leave his money away from the title—the *name*—and to a man so certain to make ducks and drakes of it."

"Who can say what any one will do. Mowbray himself told me before he last went abroad that Swindon was to be his heir. But as for the succession, that's a long way off," says the Squire, comfortably. "Mowbray is a year younger than I am!"

"But many years more infirm," says Mrs. Egerton, dreamily. "And Victor is the dearest boy. I have sometimes thought," growing even more dreamy, "that he and Madge——"

"What!" cries the Squire, furiously. "He and Madge,—that idiotic boy and my girl! Look here, Henrietta," still boiling with rage, "I like you, you know; you're my poor Bertha's

sister, you know; but I'll stand no nonsense from you. I've asked you to come here to look after my children, but if I thought you would allow anything like—like flirtations, I'd——” He pauses, choking.

“Yes? Go on,” says Mrs. Egerton, with a broad smile; “you would? *Do* go on, John.”

“I'd be greatly surprised, and very much mistaken in my opinion of you,” says the Squire, climbing down a little, but still fuming. “Now, once for all, Henrietta, *is* there anything between that jackanapes and Madge?”

“How absurdly in earnest you are over everything,” says Mrs. Egerton, lifting her brows. “There is nothing, of course. A mere boy and girl like that! Nothing serious, of course.”

“Serious! why that looks as if——”

At this moment the door is thrown open, and someone in mad haste, and with the careless, graceful sweetness of youth, swings gaily round the Japanese screen and right into the middle of the room.

“Auntie, where are you? We've been hunting for you everywhere. Oh, papa! you here? I didn't know. I——”

CHAPTER II.

"Every spirit

This day hath made much work for tears."

"A lavish planet reigned when she was born!"

SHE stops dead short, and a faint colour rises to her cheek. She looks a charming creature standing thus, a little fear, a little surprise, a little suppressed (*ill* suppressed) gaiety in her eyes.

"Yes, I am here," says the Squire, angrily; "and," thumping the table as she turns away as if to leave the room, "you will stay here, if you please, and listen to a word from me. Your aunt there," pointing to the now guiltily flushed Mrs. Egerton, who instantly gets behind him, and begins to make frantic signs to Madge, who has fixed her with large reproachful eyes, "tells me——"

"No, John, *no*," from Mrs. Egerton.

"Gives me to understand, then, that there is some foolery going on between you and young Mowbray. Now, I'll have nothing of the sort. If you think for a moment that I'll submit to a flirtation between you and a boy who may be cast adrift by his uncle any day, you——"

"Auntie! What have you been saying?" cries the girl, turning suddenly upon Mrs. Egerton, all the burning wrath of a young heart making her eyes ablaze.

"Oh, nothing, nothing! Can't you trust me? Don't you know me?" cries poor Mrs. Egerton, wringing her hands in her distress. "Oh! go away, Madgie, darling, and I'll explain to you afterwards."

"No. I'll hear it now," says Madge, obstinately. She is very handsome, with her beautiful dark eyes and auburn hair, and her perfect mouth,—a mouth a little too determined, perhaps, for a girl of eighteen. It is a delightful mouth, however, and full of possibilities. "What do you mean?" says she, turning to her father.

"I am glad you ask me," says he, testily; "that is straightforward, anyway. But I won't say anything beyond *this*—that I will permit no love-making between you and Victor Mowbray: you hear? You," looking at the young mutinous face looking back at him in so strange a fashion, "understand?"

"Certainly I understand," says the girl, with a haughty movement of her beautiful head. "What I fail to understand is the word 'love-making.' There has never been, there never *will* be, any love-making between me and Victor Mowbray, whatever,"—she looks straight at Mrs. Egerton, and that poor innocent culprit feels

scorched by the look—"Auntie may have told you."

With this she walks slowly to the screen again, and now round it, and out of the door.

"I think it abominable of you to have given me away like that," says Mrs. Egerton, her soul on fire and her eyes full of tears. "That poor child now believes I have betrayed her trust, whereas there was little or nothing to betray. Oh! the poor child's eyes!" Suddenly she makes an onslaught on him. "It's absurd the way you treat those girls; one would think they were babies still, creatures incompetent to lay out their own paths in life."

"That is just what I do think," says Grace, who understands every point of a horse, but is ignorant of the smallest knowledge of a girl's heart.

"Well, you will have to think differently very shortly," says Mrs. Egerton, with a touch of anger that sits most curiously upon her sunny, happy, usual manner. "Girls will be girls, and young men will be young men until the world comes to its big overthrow; and I tell you this, that your girls were never made to sit in dark corners, or wear out their fingers over tapestry as our silly ancestors did."

"Not so silly, either. They were gentlewomen in very truth. But what do you want to say now?"

"I want to say that your girls are not only loving but lovable. And they must be allowed fair play."

"Fair play! They have that, goodness knows."

"They can wander round your woods, and go to occasional tennis parties; but to what does *that* amount? They go to parties, they meet people, yet they may not entertain them in turn."

"I shall never entertain again," says the Squire, who, since his wife's death, has refused to give dinner parties, or luncheon parties, or any parties at all.

"Not on a grand scale," says Mrs. Egerton, who reverences his grief for his dead wife, but thinks he ought to give way a little when his daughters have grown to marriageable age. "But I think you ought—for the girls' sake, and for your own, too,—to be a *little* hospitable. Now, these two young men who have just come to live here,—the Brandes! Their father was an old friend of yours; don't you think you ought to show them some courtesy?"

"Colonel Brandes's boys?"

"Yes. And quite nice boys, too, I hear,—in fact, I *know*. One of them has come to live at 'The Elms,' his father's place, and the other at 'Sloes;' he is agent to his brother."

"They are twins, I think. I called last week on account of knowing their father, but they were

out, providentially. Twins I believe they call themselves."

"My dear John, you must let them call themselves a better name than *that*. You must remember they are grandsons of the late Lord Sloane, and that they have been left very decently off by their father, the colonel, (you know he died three years ago when the boys were in Egypt,) and that the present lord has no heir, and that probably——"

"Oh, probably, probably," says the Squire, irritably, "you are all for probabilities. And I am all for certainties. You would launch the girls in a quagmire of possibilities, *I* would see them landed on dry ground. Therefore, I say to you I won't have either Mowbray or these two new young men—these Brandes—coming bothering round here. Fellows playing tennis all day, and unsettling the girls' minds,—fellows with no intentions."

The Squire rises testily to walk up and down the room.

"How on earth do you know that? Of course, they have no intentions so far. They have not even seen the girls. You know Madge and Janie were out yesterday when they returned your call. I wonder," sarcastically, "you did call!"

"Of course I called. How could I do less? But to have them take advantage of *that*,—a compliment merely to their dead father, my old

friend,—as a reason for running over here every other day to flirt with the girls. No. I set my face against that.”

“You seem to think even more of your girls than I do,” says Mrs. Egerton, who is now quite disgusted with him. “Are they so charming, then, so superior to all the other girls round that every man you know is desirous of laying himself at their feet? For goodness’ sake, John, *do* be sensible, and don’t make your children the laughing stock of the county. I am quite thankful now that when those two young men called yesterday they saw only——”

“Who? who?”

“*ME!*”

“And a good thing, too,” says the Squire, quite unimpressed by all her eloquence. “I hate philanderers.”

“Do you?” Mrs. Egerton is growing sarcastic. “Philanderers sometimes marry, however; and, my dear John, there are few things so objectionable or so expensive in a family as an old maid.”

“I don’t see that.”

“Don’t you? It’s a sort of slur upon the family, anyway. Makes everybody think it is of no importance, or else that the girls aren’t nice,—or well—lots of things.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” sharply. “Hope you won’t put that in the girls’ heads. They are full

enough already of that sort of trash. Did these young Brandes say when they were coming again?"

"Well, they hinted——"

"Hinted! I wish I'd been here when they called, and I'd have given them to understand they are not wanted here."

"Then, my dear John, why did you call?"

"Not call! On the sons of my old friend. That was respect to his memory. It was all for *him*. But I meant the courtesy—the acquaintance—to stop there. And," with a frown, "so it shall."

"I really wish you had explained all this before," says Mrs. Egerton, blandly, "because, unfortunately, when these two lonely young men, who have only just come to the neighbourhood, and who know apparently nobody, explained to me the situation, I took pity on them, and asked them to come to tennis and afternoon tea the day after to-morrow."

"'Pon my word, Henrietta! 'Pon my word," says the Squire, angrily; "you take a great deal on yourself."

"I feel that, John," says Mrs. Egerton, who, however, doesn't seem in the least put out. "But it needn't happen again, though I assure you, John, you are entering on a very difficult road if you think you can make recluses of your girls. Poor Vincent! Of course—she——"

Mrs. Egerton stops and a very genuine and sad sigh escapes her.

"Why d'ye call her *poor* Vincent?" asks the Squire, with a sudden sharp anger, different from the irritability he has shown before—it is stronger and filled indeed with misery. "There isn't one of them can hold a candle to Vincent," says he, almost violently.

"No, no," gently. All her anger has died away beneath his passion of sorrow. "We," soothingly, "all know that. Don't even the girls acknowledge it? Her beauty leaves all the others in the shade. But—but——"

It seems too cruel to explain the "But," and she grows silent.

"There is no one like her," says the Squire, in a sombre tone.

"I know, I know. But there *are* the others, John, and they must be considered. Madge and Janie; such pretty girls, too, if not so pretty as Vincent: *Poor* Vincent! And I warn you, John, that they won't be kept down!"

"Who wants to keep them down?" fiercely. "They can go about as much as any girls I know. Have I ever forbidden you to take them to all these silly parties round here?—though what on earth you all see in them—the same people; the same games always; tennis here, at this end; Aunt Sally over there, and in the round tent everyone drinking tea and abusing their neighbours.

That's what a tennis party comes to! And I don't care about tennis or gossip or anything else; all I say is,—and I lay it down as law,”—bringing his hand down again upon the sturdy oak table, that has been so accustomed to thumps for fifty years that probably it laughs at this new one,—“*I won't* have young men coming here.”

“That seems to be a favourite dictum of yours,” says Mrs. Egerton, slowly, a little contemptuously. “Anyway, as I tell you, I have asked the two Brandes to take tea here on Thursday. I suppose your principles will not compel you to refuse so small a hospitality to the sons of your old friend?”

The Squire fidgets: looks at her—looks back again. How like she is to his “poor sweetheart!”—and to Vincent.

“Well, this once,” says he. “But, mind you, I object to it all through. And the girls have more to think of than the young Brandes: their cousin is coming to-morrow; they should see to a room for her. Betty—was that the name?” He takes up the telegram again. “Yes, Betty O'Grady. She will be here to-morrow at seven. Remind me to send the carriage to meet her.”

CHAPTER III.

"Youth is ever apt to judge in haste,
And lose the medium in the wild extreme."

TO-MORROW has ripened into to-day; a lovely June day, all lights and shades and scented breezes. On the top of the hills beyond, great foams of clouds are resting, and between them one can see the deep eternal blue of the sky behind.

The girls, however, are too busy over Betty's bedroom (the unknown Betty, who is to come this evening) to think much of the day's beauties,—the beauties so well known to them as to have grown almost beyond loving. The saddest truth of many truths is this,—that what we most know we least love.

But the girls, devoid of thought unnecessary to the bare moment, are busying themselves about the bedroom for the new guest. That is, they are fussing here and there, upsetting their maids, and dragging the smaller chairs and tables into impossible positions, and driving the servants mad. And Janie, the third girl, a slender, *svelte* creature of sixteen, with a pert nose, (how she herself resents that nose!) and hazel

eyes that, as her old nurse used to say, "were never made for the good of her soul," is placing delicately smelling bunches of sweet-pea, got from the gardener, and heliotrope plucked from the houses, in the little vases on the dressing-table and chimney-piece.

"Not so many, Janie!" says Madge, who is standing back surveying the room with the critical eye of the young mistress.

She is not the eldest, of course; but then—poor Vincent! What could *she* do!

"No, not so many, Janie!" She says it again, Janie having taken no notice of her first protest: as she speaks she turns away from a long-suffering maid, on whom she has been impressing that the coming Betty's room is not sufficiently dusted, and that she thinks the screen in the right hand corner ought to be in the left.

"Not a bit too much," says Janie, who has a certain strength of her own. "And—oh! don't touch that screen, Brown," to the maid. "It is all right where it is. It hides that hideous wardrobe. I am sure," turning to Madge, who is now intent on a curtain, "Betty will hate that wardrobe. I always did. Do you know, I'm going to undertake Betty! She'll be of no sort of use to you, Madge; and I shall love to have her as a friend, so you need not bother about her. Betty and I are going to be chums; I feel it."

"Do you?" Madge looks amused. "Does

Betty feel it, I wonder. Has it ever occurred to you that Betty may have a soul above a little frivolous chit like *you*?"

At this, Janie, who is something of a hoyden still, flings a little water out of one of her flower vases at her, and Madge, dodging it successfully, beats a retreat.

* * * * *

Outside here, the sky is warm with sunshine, and the flowers, opened too soon by the splendid heat, are now hanging their lovely heads, tired before their time! Scarcely a breath of air disturbs the quiet of the hour, and from the low-lying lands a drowsy mist is rising.

"Earth putteth on the borrow'd robes of heav'n,
And sitteth in a sabbath of still rest."

"Where are you going, Janie?" asks Mrs. Egerton, languidly, from her seat beneath the big chestnut on the lawn, as the girl, swinging a basket gaily, goes by her.

"To the wood to get some honeysuckle for Betty's room. I say, Auntie, I hope she'll be nice. Don't you?"

"Of course I hope it," says Mrs. Egerton, doubtfully. "But Irish people, you know, are generally—— I have only met three of them in my life, and *they* were all right; but I have heard that they are very—very—*well!* you know!"

"I don't," says Janie, who is dreadfully young.

"Why—queer—you know, and uncultivated, and—*wild*! Especially when they come from the south; and the unknown Betty comes from the south of Ireland, doesn't she?"

"Yes, Cork." Janie pauses, and her rather saucy little nose, that looks as if somebody had put a finger on the tip of it when she was born, and made it square before it was quite formed, takes an upward turn. "Wild," repeats she with ill-suppressed hope and a gleam of delight in her eye. "Oh! if only she will be wild!"

"I sincerely hope she won't be," says her aunt, laughing. "As I have got to look after the lot of you, I don't care about being responsible for more crimes than I can help!" she laughs again, as she administers what she fondly believes to be a rebuke, and is presently lost in her book once more.

But Janie goes afield, searching for honeysuckle here and there,—in dusky dells and lighted hollows,—that she may find wealth wherewith to still further adorn the room of her future chum.

It is so lovely to have someone coming to stay with them. Never, never, has there been any one yet. Father is so funny about things. And a girl—a friend. She is sure to be a friend; and *her* friend, too; for Madge doesn't seem to care about her coming, and poor Vincent!

Ah! *here* is some honeysuckle; she scrambles

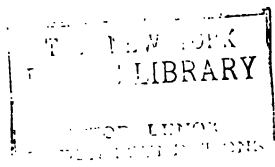
up the high bank, plucks it and lays it almost tenderly in her basket. Is it not for the coming Betty? She will be a cousin, too! That will bring them even closer. She has often heard of the O'Grady cousins, but never very much about them, except that there are a great many of them, and all girls except one boy,—the heir. Thank goodness, it isn't the heir who is coming! But if there are so many girls, perhaps Betty— Oh! *no*, impossible. A Betty could never be an old girl—she must be young! her own age, and just the sort of girl she has been wishing to meet all her life. She will take her for long walks in the beautiful woods,—Madge hates walking,—and if father will give her the bay cob they will sometimes ride over the hills and far away. Perhaps—perhaps—who knows—she may be even allowed sometimes to share her room. Auntie might let her, and nurse wouldn't say a word, and what fun it would be to sleep with her! They could sit up half the night telling each other stories, and doing each other's hair in fancy fashions.

And then there is the trout stream; of course, she can fish. A girl from the country, from Ireland, can certainly fish! Ah! here is more honeysuckle. But what a steep bank this time. Why does the stupid pretty thing choose such troublesome places to grow in? Oh! bother these briars!



"AH! HERE IS MORE HONEYSUCKLE."

(Page 26.)



A little stumble, a sudden sharp knowledge that she has no longer a place for the sole of her foot, a plunge forwards, and she finds herself in the arms of a young man who has come to a sudden and astonished halt at the foot of the bank.

CHAPTER IV.

“What makes your cheek like a warm white rose?”

“I HOPE you are not hurt?” says he, anxiously. He is tall and very handsomely built, with grey eyes, and hair that is nearly black. The eyes are small but full of life and meaning, and the hair (what the barber has left of it) is fine in texture; but it must be confessed that on the whole the man is ugly. Nothing on earth would redeem his nose, and his mouth, beyond doubt, is one of the largest on record. When he laughs it is perfectly abnormal; and, as it takes a good deal of exercise in that way, its immense proportions are perpetually *en evidence*.

“No—no, I think not; I’m sure not,” says Janie, with a little gasp, some natural confusion, and a great deal of suppressed wrath. *Beast!* What on earth brought him here at this moment of all others, to witness her discomfiture! She could have got on perfectly well without him; if the worst had come to the worst, a fall would have done her no harm—*so long as nobody saw it!*

The sting lies here: he has seen it, or something approaching it, and will tell it to other

people, of course. Who can he be? Somebody staying with the Courtenays, no doubt. They are always having young men to stay with them, and he'll go home and tell the girls there, and they will laugh—and——

Meantime, her despised rescuer has been talking vigorously. She hasn't heard a syllable he has said, so wrapt is she in her own angry forebodings, but now some words meet her ear.

"That's the worst of girls, you know," he is saying to her, evidently with admonition in his tone. "They never know where they are going."

Janie lifts her eyes to his; wrath is burning in her soul! Really this is too much. One would think she was still a mere school-girl, instead of being nearly seventeen! *The idea!*

"*I knew where I was going,*" says she, with considerable dignity.

"Did you?" says he; and then, as the sudden remembrance comes to him where she *did* go, right into his arms, a sense of amusement overcomes him, and he gives way to mirth, subdued, indeed, but of a distinct character.

"Yes," returns Janie, with increased dignity and a slight frown: "I was gathering honey-suckle for my cousin's room. She will arrive this evening. May I ask," severely this, "if you know where you are going?"

The childishness of the retaliation tickles him

immensely. "Well, I hope so," says he; he pauses and smiles. There is a little swing in his voice,—a sweetness? a roughness? *What* is it? Again she wonders who he is. Where has he come from? Not an Englishman, certainly. How strange his accent is! How oddly he frames some of his words, drawing out some of the syllables and shortening others, and the voice going up and down in a sort of monotonous music! Oh! not an Englishman, certainly, but quite as certainly not a foreigner. She has never been to Ireland, or she would have recognised that good old touch of the brogue at once.

"However," continues he, candidly, "I confess that, though I believe I am on the right path to my destination, doubt has attended me at every step. I am a stranger in a strange land."

"Oh!" says Janie, who is beginning to grow interested.

"A wretched fact, isn't it? But it remains. Yesterday for the first time I set foot in England, and I had hoped that the people I am coming to stay with, would have sent to the train to meet me."

"Oh! They wouldn't," says Janie, promptly, thinking of the Courtenays, who are proverbial for forgetting to do the things they ought to do. "They never remember anything."

"Is that so? I had understood otherwise;



however, you are right so far. There was no one to meet me. They had evidently forgotten my existence, or perhaps the notice of my coming was short,—they never got the telegram. I felt a little stranded on the platform. Especially as there was nothing to be begged, borrowed, or stolen in the way of a vehicle. So I determined to tramp it, and a friendly porter gave me the right direction.”

“The friendly porter gave you the wrong one, however,” says Janie. She pauses a moment, and then is unable to resist it. “After all,” says she, “you are as bad as a girl; you don’t know where you are going, either!”

If she had dreamt of withering him with this remark, she finds herself mightily mistaken. Had it been the biggest joke on record (perhaps he took it as one), he could not have been more amused.

“That’s an awfully unkind cut,” says he. “But it supports me in my first view. It makes you more of a girl than ever. Girls are always unkind, you know.”

“Ah! that shows how little you know about them,” says Janie, with a contemptuous shrug of her shoulders. She turns away with a faint salute, and goes down the wooded pathway at a tremendous pace.

“I daresay you are right,” says the young man, hurrying after her. “In fact, I’m sure

you are. And, anyway, if there is a doubt, I feel positive you are the exception to the rule. At all events, it is in your power to prove it now. You can be kind to *me*. You," hopefully, "are evidently a resident in this neighbourhood, and can give me an idea as to where I am."

"Certainly," says Janie. It is her usual formula. She speaks politely but coldly, and stands still until he comes up with her.

"Oh! thank you," says he. "The reason I trouble you is, that you told me a little while ago that the porter had sent me on a wrong road. This, then, is not the right way to go?"

"Oh! *no*. You must go that way," pointing in the opposite direction to where she is going.

"That way? Yet the porter——"

"He made a mistake, I suppose. Anyway, that is the shortest path to Courtenay Hall."

"To where?"

"The *Hall*," very distinctly.

"But I don't want to go to 'The Hall.' I want to go to 'The Court.'"

Janie stands still and stares at him, her lovely eyes like saucers.

"*What?*" says she. He stares back at her.

"Well, there *is* a place called 'The Court,' isn't there?" asks he, but with some slight trepidation in his tone. "You know it?"

"Yes." The answer comes faintly. To ask

her if there is such a place as "The Court." If she knows it? "Yes, I know it. I—why, I——"

"Oh! That's all right!" he breaks in. "It is there I am going,—on a visit to Mr. Grace. You know him, perhaps?"

Janie stops dead short.

"I'm sure you are not," says she. "My—Mr. Grace hates young men."

"Good heavens!" says the stranger,—the impostor.

Janie has now, at once, made up her mind about him. An impostor he is.

"You are certainly not going to 'The Court,'" says she, standing up to him quite valiantly. Afterwards she said with regard to this moment that—*But that's another story.*

"I certainly am," returns he, calmly. "You evidently know very little of 'The Court' people, or you would understand how it is."

"Know little of 'The Court' people! If any-one should know of them, *I* should," says she, haughtily. "I myself am one of 'The Court' people. My father is Mr. Grace! Now—*now* I can see what an impostor you are."

She looks to see him go down beneath this, but he holds up uncommonly well. There isn't so much as a sign of a blush about him, and the only touch of grace lies in the fact that he doesn't say a word. He stands silent, as if thinking.

"Thinking of confession, perhaps," says Janie to herself. He wants time to confess. After all, poor creature, she has been a little hard on him. Time is given him, however, and now he opens his mouth. "At last," thinks Janie, "I am going to hear a full, true confession from *someone*." She feels quite proud. A criminal brought to justice, and by her! She looks at the wretched man, prepared to hear his humble acknowledgment of his crime, ready to condone it.

"You can speak!" says she, quite grandly.

He takes advantage of her kindness.

"My dear cousin," says he, "I am delighted to meet you!"

Janie's face at this moment would be worthy a painter's brush. She moves back a little from him, as one would move from something mad, and regards him with unkindly eyes. She had been quite ready to forgive him—to help him to escape (many of those impostors, father has often said, are got up just like gentlemen), but this abominable touch of audacity.

"Your—your cousin!" gasps she.

"Yes, I think so," quite calmly, and with an amused smile. "I feel quite sure of it. Now that I look at you I can see the likeness. You are very like Muriel. She has got hair like yours, and a nose. Her nose is the image of yours!"

This is too much!



Janie's nose, as has been said, is a sore point with her. Vincent's is pure Greek, Madge's irreproachable, but *hers*,—the term "*nez retroussée*" is abhorrent to her.

"I don't know your sister Muriel," says she, with a flash of anger, "and" (most uncivilly) "I don't *want* to know her or her nose" (this very distinctly) "either; and I think it is very impertinent of you, a stranger, to speak to me of my nose at all, or of anything else, for the matter of that; and as to your saying you are a cousin of mine——"

"I beg your pardon," says the young man. "I'm awfully sorry, really. I suppose I have made some mistake—though where it comes in—I quite thought from what you said that you were a daughter of Mr. Grace of 'The Court.' I'm very sorry for the mistake I have made."

He lifts his hat, and makes a movement as if to go; then stops short, struck by something in her face.

"Are you sure you aren't?" asks he.

"I am sure I am," returns she. And then, as if in spite of things, they both laugh.

"But who are you?" asks she.

"Why, I'm Batty O'Grady," says he, quietly. "My father sent yours a wire yesterday. Did he get it?"

He waits for an answer, but Janie is too full of a great and new astonishment to answer him

at once. When at last the truth comes quite home to her, she says slowly,—

“So you are—Betty?”

“I’m not, indeed. I’m Batty,” says he, laughing. “Bartholomew is my full name, and I always feel a little guilty about it. Who could be expected to say all those syllables straight off at a minute’s notice. But that is beside the question. I’m Batty. *That’s* settled, I hope—eh!—But you? Are you Vincent, or Madge, or Janet? You see I know all your names, so I’m not quite so much an impostor as you thought. Well—which is it?”

He waits, but Janie says nothing.

“Oh! look here; I do call this mean! I’ve given myself quite away, and you won’t even say if you’re Vincent, or Madge, or——”

“Janie,” says she, quickly. “Yes, I’m Janie.”

“Then I’m on the right road after all, and I *did* know where I was going, you see, and that stupid porter—— Look here, I owe that fellow something, don’t I?”

“Oh! of course you can make fun of me if you like,” says Janie, shrugging her shoulders. “I’ve laid myself open to it. But——”

“Well, I’m not an impostor, anyway; you must acknowledge *that*.”

“Yes. But you’re not Betty, either, and I am very sorry for *that*!”

CHAPTER V.

“ And thou betrayest all's secretness :
Thy mind is lorn, thou janglest as a jay,
Thy face is turned in a new array.”

BATTY—to Janie it seems impossible even now not to call him “Betty”—proves full of talk as they go towards the house. That the girl is very silent seems not to check the ardour of his discourse in the smallest degree. He is evidently enjoying himself to the full, whilst Janie is suffering tortures.

Good gracious ! What will they say at home ? What will father say ?—and auntie ? Why it is enough to make even Madge “sit up,”—Madge, who as a rule is invulnerable where the emotions come in.

As they turn the last corner of the avenue, that brings not only the noble old house but the tennis courts below into full view, Janet's last remnants of courage entirely forsake her.

“ If you don't mind,” says she, stopping short in the middle of the avenue, “ I think I'll leave you here.”

“ But why here ?” asks her cousin, very reasonably surprised.

“ Why *not* here ?” says Janie, pointing to the

entrance to "The Court;" "the door is over there, and you can find your own way in, can't you?"

"Well, it seems simple," says Mr. O'Grady, looking favourably at the magnificent old oak doorway, that is now, as it usually is, lying wide open, betraying visions of the cool, grand hall within.

"Yes—isn't it?" says Janie, catching at anything, and too upset to take umbrage at the note of amusement in his tone. "Well, go on then; Miles, the butler, will tell you where to go, and all the rest of it."


"But your father——"

"He's out, I——" hope is on the end of her tongue, but she puts in "I'm afraid" just in the nick of time. She moves away from him. "Good-bye for the present," says she.

"The present is likely to lose a great deal of its charm," says he, regarding her ruefully. "Is this how you are going to treat your new-found Betty?—that *was* the name, wasn't it?"

"It was," says Janie; "but you see I haven't found her. There, go indoors; they'll make you quite comfortable, and you'll like to make yourself a bit—er—tidy, don't you know, before you meet auntie."

"Good heavens!" says he, "am I as bad as all that?" He gives an eager look around at his clothes, then calls after her, "Where are you going?"



"Over there," pointing in the direction of the tennis court, where O'Grady can see some forms moving to and fro.

"Over there?"

"Yes, to explain to them."

"Explain—to them?"

"About your coming," says she, with some impatience. "Why on earth doesn't he go into the house? Papa may be over there, too; and if he is, and she should bring up this unexpected and dreadfully masculine 'Betty' without a word of explanation, there will probably be 'wigs on the green' in no time."

"I think I'd like to explain that myself," says he, with a view to taking the trouble off her shoulders; but she makes a little gesture that almost looks like pushing him back.

"Well, you can't," says she, "and at all events you sha'n't. I've quite made up my mind about *that*." She looks indeed distinctly formidable. "I have told you your coming will be a surprise, and I must break it to them gently——"

"But firmly," puts in Mr. O'Grady, giving his advice with emphasis.

"They have all been expecting a girl. Papa, I'm afraid, will take it badly. He endures girls, but he hates boys." She stops and regards him with a mournful eye. "You aren't even that," says she.

"Janie, is this kind?" asks he, in a grieved

tone. "If I'm neither girl nor boy, what am I? In this age I thought there were only three genders,—the man, the woman, and the bore. You make out a new lot: the girl, the boy, and—— What am I?"

"I know what you'll be in another moment if you don't go in," says Janie, with really astounding aplomb.

"Yes?"

"A dead man!"

At this he turns and flies, as if struck with horror, and she, running across the lawn, arrives breathless beside her aunt and Madge, to find, to her comfort, that her father is not there after all.

"Oh, auntie! *such* a story as I have got to tell you."

"A story!" says Madge, giving way to mirth. And then with preternatural gravity, "I must say, Janie, after all the care that has been taken with your bringing up——"

"Pouf! Put your head in a bag," says Janie. "Just listen to this. Betty is not a Betty after all."

"What!" from Mrs. Egerton and Madge in a breath. "You've met her?"

"Yes—she—*he*—is come."

"What on earth are you trying to say, Janie? If she isn't a Betty, *what* is she?"

"A Batty!"

"A boy," says Mrs. Egerton, faintly.

"Worse, far worse. *A young man!*"

* * * * *

"Good gracious! Who is going to tell your father?" says Mrs. Egerton, when the first shock is over.

"You, of course," says Madge. "And I think you had better do it at once, too. Where is our white elephant now, Janie?"

"I sent him indoors. I was afraid papa was here."

"Indoors! and up to his—to Betty's room! Oh!" groans Madge, with sudden painful remembrance. "Think of the pin-cushions! and the little pink bows put everywhere—and the flowers —"

"He'll think he is going to be married," says Mrs. Egerton, giving way to a suffocating burst of laughter.

"He'll be out in a moment," says Janie, who is craning her body over the stone wall, lined with creepers and evergreens, that lies on one side of the court, and that from the top commands a full view of the house. "Yes," with a little scream, "here he comes." She is now in imminent danger of breaking her neck, and Madge hauls her back with stern determination. "He is very good-looking, do you know, he is really, in spite of——"

"Of what? ~~Do~~ be quick; he's coming."

"His eyes?" hurriedly. "They are small and

green, and his nose is anyhow, and his hair is the blackest thing you ever saw, and——”

“He *must* be good looking, indeed,” begins Madge, sarcastically. But there is no time to say more. The foe is upon them.

Mrs. Egerton rises and goes to meet him.

“So you are not a girl after all,” says she, laughing. “Janie has been giving us a most graphic account of you.”

“I expect it was those telegraph people who were to blame,” says O’Grady, laughing. “A letter here or there to them is of little consequence.”

“I hope it won’t make any consequence to you, either,” says Mrs. Egerton, hospitably.

“How can I tell. Already,” he glances at Janie, “I have been termed an impostor.”

“Was that Janie?” asks Madge, laughing.

“Yes, it was,” says Janie, indignantly. “But,” with a wrathful glance at O’Grady, “I think you needn’t have told them about it.”

“I think so too,” returns he, cheerfully, “but you see an impostor is never to be depended upon. I’ll have to give up that pose and go in for strict virtue; then I’ll never make any mistakes.”

Mrs. Egerton has been supplying him with tea and cakes—he seems fond of cakes—and now she grows solicitous as to his health.

“I hope the passage was a good one,” says she,

alluding to the voyage between Kingstown and Holyhead, "and that you didn't suffer much."

"Not much," he assures her.

There seems to be a little hesitation in his speech; and as he looks at her his air somehow conveys to her the impression that he is holding back something that he would rather die than tell.

"You are a bad sailor, then," says she, sympathetically. The look of the mildest wave upset *her*!

"No, I'm afraid that can't be counted among my many virtues."

"Oh! then a *good* sailor, perhaps."

"Why, neither good nor bad," says he.

"Oh! you must be one or the other," says Madge.

"I'm very sorry, but I'm not, indeed," says Mr. O'Grady, mildly. "I'm not a sailor at all; I'm a land-agent, or, rather, going to be one. That's why the governor has sent me over to your father; 'to learn my trade,' he says. He's of the opinion that English landlords know more than Irish ones. Do they? And he wants me to study farming here for a few months—if you'll have me."

There's a second's silence. For a few *months*! A young man in the house with the Squire for a few months! Mrs. Egerton is the first to recover.

"We shall of course be delighted to have you," says she, which is quite true. They will—but the Squire!

"That's all right, then," says Mr. O'Grady, with charming *bonhomie*, smiling placidly upon the faces round him, who smile back at him with terror dimly veiled behind their would-be cheerful glances. Good gracious! What is going to be the upshot of it all?

"I don't think I quite answered your kind question," says O'Grady, turning to Mrs. Eger-ton again. "I really had a delightful passage, thank you, and a very charming reception at the end of it." He looks at Madge, and from her to Jânie, and back again. "As a rule, I have not been treated to pin-cushions when taking 'my walks abroad,' and as for the flowers—— When I got into the room so kindly allotted to me I felt like Celia in her arbour. But I liked the pin-cushions best. Perhaps I'm not so accustomed to them. So thoughtful of——" (he looks at Madge) "you?"

She shakes her head.

"Ah! you then," to Janie.

"I stuck the pins in them," returns she, most ungraciously.

"Oh, those pins!" says he, with radiant appreciation. "I saw 'Welcome' written by them on one pin-cushion, 'Betty' on the other. 'Welcome, Betty!' It seemed to me quite an ovation."

"It wasn't meant for *you*," says Janie, now driven out of all the paths of courtesy.

"I saw that also," says Mr. O'Grady, now positively beaming upon her, "and I felt sure you would like to rectify the mistake when I came, so I got a few more pins and changed the E into A. *Now* it is 'Welcome, Batty,' and I feel *so* proud. It took me quite a long time to do it, but I usually," with a modest air, "surmount most of my difficulties."

"Madge, your cousin will take another cup of tea," says Mrs. Egerton, rising. Her heart is beating a little quickly. Just over there, on his way to the stables, providentially, she sees the Squire, and, trembling, she moves across the lawn to tell him all about it.

The Squire, when told, is, as she had known he would be, like a ramping, roaring lion.

"There was a mistake about the name, John," says she, as she faces him in the library. She had made him come back to the house. It was impossible to let him storm in the yard with the grooms looking on. "It's not a daughter who has come; it's—a—a son!"

"*What!*" says Grace, as if not believing his senses.

"Yes, indeed."

"Not a girl!"

"No."

"A *boy!*"

"Not so much a boy, either, though a little boyish in his ways; a young man about twenty-three or so."

"Then back he goes this minute," says the Squire, with a fling of his hand on the table.

"Not quite this minute, I hope," says she, with dignity. "You will give your cousin's son some dinner, I suppose."

Her calmness always checks him; he pauses, and as he does one of the men enters with the evening's post. The Squire tears off the envelope from one letter, and runs his eyes over it rapidly.

"H'm, h'm. 'Send him here to learn farming, collecting of rents. Hope you will give him valuable hints. Will eventually have large property when I am gone'—pish!—'and would like him to know how to manage it better than I have done.' H'm, h'm. 'Think it good plan to make him work as land-agent for a few years; and Lord Carmore, an old friend of mine, is willing to give him a trial on one of his estates.' H'm." The Squire flings down the letter. "The devil is in it, Henrietta. How am I to refuse O'Grady in this matter?"

"We must think," says Mrs. Egerton, bringing her pretty brows together.

"Of course he can't stay here."

"Of *course* not," with immense emphasis.

"If," presently, "he did stay here——"

"My *dear* John, what *are* you thinking of?"

"Well, why not? why not?" angrily. "Good heavens! if I can't have my own cousin's son here, *who* can I have?"

"But the girls,—think of the girls."

"Pouf! A boy like that."

"Twenty-three!"

"A mere lad;—and with *you* to look after them."

"Ah! I never thought of that," says Mrs. Egerton, who is now choking with laughter. How many times in his wrathful moments has he told her she is not of any sort of use at all in that way.

But now the Squire has changed his mood, and has gone off on the old track.

"They needn't think of entering into a flirtation with this—this intruder," says he. ("They" always means Madge and Janie.) "I'll take good care his time is well employed. If he has been sent to learn English farming, I'll see that he *does* it. I'll have no idle young man lounging about my house. Already there are too many of them coming and going. It seems you are expecting these two Brandes to-morrow;—for to-morrow *only*, remember, Henrietta. Of the coming of these silly young fools there seems to be no end. And even age doesn't seem to hold them back! I've noticed lately that William Eyre, whom I thought a sensible sort of a fellow, has been coming pretty constantly."

Mrs. Egerton, stooping, picks up a pen off the carpet. It takes her some time to do it.

"*He's* not a chicken, anyway," says the Squire; "forty, if a day. Is it Madge he is after?"

"I—don't think so," says Mrs. Egerton, who has now restored the pen to its place. The stooping for it under the table has considerably heightened her colour.

"I do," says the Squire. He pauses. "After that child! Well! *He's* an ass, if ever I met one."

"He's not," says Mrs. Egerton. This is perhaps the shortest speech that has ever emanated from her, and the Squire stares as if hardly comprehending.

"It is you who are so stupid," says she, with some slight confusion now, seeing he is looking at her. "Why can't you accept things as they come? This—this young cousin of yours, Batty O'Grady, who is coming to stay here for some months——"

"*Months!*" roars the Squire.

"Yes, months!" indignantly. She has in a measure lost her usually perfect temper, though she herself hardly knows why. "And why not? He is your cousin,—belonging to you. He's not a viper, or a serpent, I suppose, because he belongs to your sex."

"I don't care what he is; he's a swindle, anyway," says the Squire; "a perfect fraud. He

comes here as a girl, and now——” He strikes his hand upon the open letter. “And as for you, Henrietta, instead of attacking *me*, I think you ought to feel distinctly ashamed of yourself. Where is your ‘little Betty’ now, eh?” mimicking her tone of a former occasion, ‘the *little, small, pale* cousin’ we were expecting? *Eh?*”

“Out on the tennis ground taking tea with the girls,” says Mrs. Egerton, gathering up her skirts and marching out of the room with considerable dignity.

CHAPTER VI

"In Flanders whilom was a company
Of youngë folkës."

THE Squire, to mark his disapproval of the coming of the Brandes, has gone away to a distant farm to see about some improvements on it, and to worry the natives, no doubt. He had shown symptoms of a desire to take Batty with him, with a view to starting him on his studies, but the young man had "held tight," as he himself expressed it, and had pleaded fatigue, which, considering his long journey of yesterday, had something in it.

The Squire's departure has proved a distinct relief, which providentially he did not know, or certainly he would not have gone a-visiting his tenants to-day,—to-day that is like a dream of joy, so soft, so warm. Out here on the lawn the sunbeams are playing delicate games in and out between the branches of the great chestnut-tree that stands near the steps that lead down to the tennis courts. And from the parterres to the left, the sweet, heavy perfume of the roses comes to one with every passing breeze. Roses of every kind, of every hue, bedeck the place,

climbing the ancient walls, laughing through the trellises, and playing bo-peep with each other through the pillars that lead to the verandah up above.

Roses, roses everywhere! and all old-world roses, and therefore richest in perfumes and in memories. There the climbing roses red, and yellow, and orange, and here in the beds the Rose Celeste, whose buds are sweetest and truest pink of all, and here the Rose Unique, with its soft, white face and delicate bloom so easily destroyed, and over there the moss rose in its velvet setting, and here, close by, the gorgeous cabbage rose, whose heart contains above all other roses the very soul of summer,—a rose once breathed never to be forgotten. Oh! Queen of Flowers, so justly named, I for one give you forever homage:

“ From the depths of the green garden closes,
Where summer in darkness dozes,
Till autumn pluck from his hand
An hour-glass that holds not a sand;
From the maze that a flower-belt encloses,
To the stones and sea-grass on the strand,
How red was the reign of the roses
Over the rose-crowned land!”

The girls, Madge and Janie, have come down to the lawn with Mrs. Egerton to wait for the expected guests. They had implored Vincent to come with them, though with little hope of suc-

cess, but she had entreated them to let her wait until they came.

"Yes, yes," nervously; "she knew it looked a little ungracious, but she would come down later—she would *indeed*—when the others came."

Those "others" whom she had never seen—whom she never——

Mrs. Egerton and the girls had been a little surprised at her promising to come at all, and very glad of it.

"Oh, there you are, Batty!" cries Madge, as Mr. O'Grady comes into view in fresh white flannels and his usual beaming smile. "What a lovely get up. Anyone would have thought you would have taken more time than you have over such an elaborate toilette."

Batty grins, and flings himself on the grass beside Janet, who has disdained to take any notice of his "beauty." He would perhaps have answered Madge according to her words, but that her eyes have left his, and are now concentrated on an opening in the shrubberies far away over there.

All at once she rises, and with a casual air strolls towards the opening mentioned. The laurels hide her presently, and walking a little quicker she comes presently face to face with a young man, who is advancing towards her at quite an unusually eager pace.

He is tall, slender, athletic, and singularly

young in appearance—younger than his years warrant; but perhaps the absence of any hirsute growth about his face, beyond a slight moustache that barely hides his handsome mouth, helps to give this impression.

“I saw you coming,” says Madge, who has a good deal of honesty in her disposition, and necessarily very little subjection, “and I came to meet you.”

“You did?” The young man, Victor Mowbray, having taken her hand holds it. “The Brandes told me they were coming this afternoon, and so I took heart of grace. Your father,” with a smile that lights up his beautiful, youthful face, “will not see much worse in three than in two.”

He is still holding her hand—very closely now—but Madge says nothing; she is looking, not at him, but at the ground, and stands silent as though a spell has been cast over her.

“Was I wrong?” asks he, gently, partly releasing her hand.

“Oh! no, no!” she says this quickly, suddenly; and suddenly, too, she lifts her eyes to his. There is a little happy gleam in them that *his* eyes gazing into hers catch. And now they are both smiling at each other, fingers intertwined.

“And for one thing,” says she, laughing softly, “papa isn’t here to-day; so you need not have had all these wonderful imaginings about him.”

"No?"

"No." She pauses, and makes a little attempt to draw her hand away, but so little a one that he holds on to it valiantly. "And for another thing," says she, "why didn't you come before?"

"Was I asked?"

"I think so."

"Oh! by Mrs. Egerton, perhaps, and that very casually; but—by you?"

"Will you never come unless I ask you?"

"I shall never care to come unless you ask me."

"Yet you are here to-day."

"Ah!" Unconsciously but strongly, still holding her hand, he draws her to him. "My strength was insufficient," says he.

At this they both give way to laughter, low, nervous, happy,—the little broken laugh that only lovers know, and the two heads grow closer together, and the two handsome faces look—and look—and look—until——. Victor Mowbray finds himself pushed hurriedly backwards by a girl, whose face is still happy, but now sweetened by a little blush.

Had he been going to—to——

She has turned abruptly and is now going back to the tennis courts, and he following her. They soon find themselves in the open, where Mrs. Egerton and Janie can be seen welcoming

two young men, who have apparently only just arrived.

"Those must be the Brandes," says Madge, in some surprise.

"Yes."

"You know them?"

"I have met them twice only. They are twins, you know. But look at them. Could you imagine any two brothers so unlike in appearance?"

Madge, standing still for a moment, scrutinizes them closely. Yes, they are unlike,—singularly unlike in every way. One, tall, dark, emaciated, and something else too; intense is the word that seems to suit him, *in a way*, but yet, when one comes to think of it, in a way that is not really his. A saint rather, a mediæval saint, with his eager, earnest eyes and white, calm face.

As for the other, Madge at once decides he is more human, if not half so good looking. Tom Brande, indeed, at this moment, is a distinct contrast to his brother, Cedric. He has turned to speak more directly to Mrs. Egerton, and a full view of his face can be got from where Madge is standing. A strong face—dark, too—but without special beauty of any kind. A man evidently to be liked by the many, loved by the few; a man to be trusted in evil days as in the good, and with no shadow of uncertainty in all his dealings.

"Dear Victor, so glad to see you," says Mrs.

Egerton, greeting Mowbray with her kindest smile; "so good of you to come. Mr. Grace is away, gone up to the Littons' farm to inspect the crop he *says*, but to get a new pansy from Mrs. Litton, I feel sure. You know his craze for pansies. And it seems Mrs. Litton, in some extraordinary way, has got one that is quite the pride of the country side." In the middle of her gay little speech she whispers something hurriedly to Janie, who darts away from her to the house. "I have just sent for Vincent," whispers she to Victor; "she has promised, to our astonishment, to come out for tea. You haven't met our new cousin, Batty O'Grady, yet, have you? But I assure you he has had already a most wonderfully good effect upon Vincent. It is the funniest thing in the world, but I assure you he refuses to see there is anything out of the way with her, and it seems to please her, poor child—to give her courage. I am afraid, now that I look back on it all, that we have been a little too—well—*too* solicitous for her happiness, if you can understand me."

"I can, I can," says Mowbray. He breaks off—"here she comes," he says.

Mrs. Egerton follows his glance anxiously. Across the lawn, and now quite near to them, a young girl is coming, one hand leaning lightly on Janie's arm. Mrs. Egerton's sharp turn has perhaps made all the others turn too, and whether

that was the cause or not, now all eyes are fixed on the coming two. Who is this other girl, so slim, so slender, with such soft, wide eyes,—eyes with a depth impossible to reach? Tom Brande, watching her, takes a deep breath. Was ever girl before so lovely? He had thought Madge a pretty girl, even more than pretty, and Janie a girl who might be even beautiful, but *this* girl——

Nearer she comes, leaning always lightly on Janie's arm, and now a little emotion stirs the features, that it suddenly occurs to Tom Brande have been kept by their owner in a studied calm that has cost her somewhat dear. She turns, whispering something to Janie, who presses her arm against her side reassuringly, and then the beautiful face recovers its calm again.

And now she is with them, and Mrs. Egerton is introducing her to the two Brandes. She holds out her hand, and Tom being the nearest to her takes it.

He has never once, since her coming across the grass, removed his gaze from her eyes, and now, as his fingers close on hers, he still looks —— So sweet—so strangely sweet a face, and yet—what is it?

"I am glad to meet you," says she, softly.

With an agitation he (not knowing) cannot account for, she tightens her fingers upon his. Then stops her little faint attempt at welcome,

as if asking him to help her out, to continue this first conversation. But Tom Brande, who never yet in all his life was without an answer to anyone, now finds himself hopelessly stranded, dumb, stupid.

What is it? Why does she look at him like that? Her eyes, wide open, do not seem to catch his——

A faint, *faint* touch of distress comes into the beautiful face.

“You must speak to me,” says she, colouring in a little, vague, delicate way; “you must let me hear your voice. It is by their voices that I learn to know my friends, because——” she hesitates,—and the hesitation is inexpressibly sad, “because *I cannot see them!*”

CHAPTER VII

"The truest love that ever heart
Felt at its kindled core,
Did through each vein, in quickened start,
The tide of being pour."

Yes; she is *blind*! This lovely thing, with the first breath of life upon her. It seems impossible to believe it at first, looking at her with those large eyes open. Indeed, there is nothing to show for it, save the little nervous action of the hands and the clinging to the arm of those nearest to her. Though singularly beautiful, this first child of the Squire's union with "his sweetheart," and the one likest to her—and therefore dearest to him—is denied the joy of looking at the world as she goes by it.

A terrible fever when she was five years of age had left her strong and perfect in body but bereft of sight. The large, soft brown eyes with their heavily fringed lids (that lie like silk upon the rounded cheek), as you look at them, *seem* as though they looked at you. But they see neither you, nor the wall beyond, nor the heavens outside, nor the earth beneath, nor the gracious sweetness of the summer's day, nor the sad fallings of the night that wrap her, as them, in a darkness that can be felt.

But the world's darkness rises and lifts, and light shows itself between its lids of dawn, but Vincent, with her eyes wide, sees the dawn—never.

But if her eyes sit ever in darkness, her soul sees nothing but light. It sits in the light always, and heaven, darkened to her beautiful, sightless orbs, comes down to her soul and dwells there.

A sudden, hot flush darkens Tom Brande's brow as the truth comes home to him,—a touch of confusion that annoys him until he remembers that she cannot see it.

But the remembrance gives him a far deeper pang. Oh! that she *could* see, and sneer, and despise— And then comes another certain thought that, even if she could see, she would never sneer or despise; she *could* not—with that face.

He has murmured something polite to her, and now, happening to turn, his eyes light on his brother. Cedric's gaze is rapt, and given entirely to the girl. His spiritual face has lit up, and there is something in it that Tom has never seen there before,—a delight, an awe, a longing!

Tom marvels at the new look, and ponders on it. Often he has seen his brother's face transfigured by tales of the wrongs, the miseries of the unhappy ones of the earth,—those who come to birth only to crawl to death; and the eager de-

sire to help, to succour the suffering, he has felt for many years has been born with his brother. Now that desire has arisen again and is showing in his dark eyes, but intensified a thousand-fold, and linked with another look that is strange to Tom. He fails to grasp the meaning of it.

"This is Mr. Cedric Brande, darling," says Mrs. Egerton, with great tenderness.

"Yes?" says the girl, questioningly, laying her little white hand in Cedric's now, who too has *taken* it. He seems to understand the situation far better than Tom,—Tom who, as a rule, guides *him* through most conventional difficulties.

"I hope we shall be friends," says Cedric, in his low, intense way.

Vincent lifts her beautiful head, and looks round her anxiously (if one can call it looking) until—it is a mere chance—her eyes seem to fall on Tom Brande.

"Is it your voice?" asks she.

"No, my brother's," says Tom.

At this moment the wonderful similarity between his voice and Cedric's becomes even clearer to him. It strikes him afresh, and not altogether pleasantly.

"*My* voice," says Cedric, in a low tone.

Tom, he hardly knows why, laughs.

"For the matter of that it might as well be mine," says he.

"Yes, yes. The tones are very much alike,"

says the blind girl, quickly. She sighs. "Too much alike for me to—*know*. Always I can tell, but now——"

"I shall adopt a disguise," says Tom, again with that detestable touch of frivolity that has seemed to have seized upon him since first he saw her and knew the sadness of her life.

As he finishes his miserable speech, he expects to see her turn her sad, beautiful face from his; but to his surprise it lights up into a charming smile.

"That was the first Mr. Brande who spoke to me now," says she, gaily. Her lips part, and the prettiest little laugh possible escapes from them. "I am right, auntie?"

"Quite right, darling," says Mrs. Egerton, into whose eyes tears of gladness have come at seeing her so bright with these strangers—these two young men who, perhaps, may give her some amusement—if—— But then—the Squire.

"How did you know?" asks Tom.

"Because you," she hesitates and holds out her hand, and Tom takes it reverently, "you have a happy nature. You like to laugh."

"He can be serious too," says Cedric, who is devoted to his brother.

The blind girl holds out her other hand to him.

"And you," says she, pausing, and pressing his fingers slightly as though getting inspiration

from them, "you are always serious and," thoughtfully, "good."

"Oh, I say," says Tom Brande, "I call that distinctly unfair. Am I then of *no* good?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that," says she, laughing and blushing divinely. Then all at once a little cloud damps the beauty of her smile: "I wish you did not both speak *quite* so much alike," says she, plaintively.

Mrs. Egerton pinches her ear.

"Would you undo the laws of nature?" asks she; "and come, here is someone whose voice you already know, and who has no 'double'—Victor Mowbray."

Vincent greets him with her usual exquisite gentleness; but his coming does not seem to interest her,—she looks preoccupied, thoughtful.

"Mr. Brande," says Mrs. Egerton, turning to Tom, "come and help me to get up a game. I am afraid we have not enough to fill two courts; but if *you* will play with Madge, and your brother——"

"Don't put me in, please," says Cedric, looking up from the seat he has taken beside Vincent. "There are plenty of others, and Miss Grace and I have just lit upon a happy subject."

Tom Brande casts a hurried glance at Vincent. She is sitting with her small hands folded in her lap, and with her lips smiling.

"Then you, Victor," says Mrs. Egerton, "you and Janie."

"I'm going to play a single with Batty," says that young lady, promptly. There is vengeance in her eye as it rests on Batty. Plainly, she has made up her mind to give him an awful thrashing, now that she has got him to give her "*thirty*."

"Then I am afraid you must fall back upon me, Victor," says Mrs. Egerton, a little shamefacedly—though, indeed, she need not have been ashamed of anything, as she still looks as comely a woman as one need care to see, and is as good a tennis player as can be found anywhere in the neighbourhood.

CHAPTER VIII.

“ On grass, on gravel, in the sun,
Or now beneath the shade,
They met in pleasant Kensington,
A 'prentice and a maid.”

It is an hour later. Already the golden light of the day is giving place to a tender twilight. The great heat has died away; a little breeze has been born, and above are the

“ Skies fulfilled with the sundown stilled and splendid, spread
As a flower that spreads.”

Janie's single with O'Grady has come to an untimely end long ago,—lost in a storm of words hardly parliamentary on Janie's part; and now Mrs. Egerton, who, it has been said, is no mean opponent at tennis, and can give as strong a service as any man, having won her set triumphantly, has come up looking flushed and very handsome to greet a large man, in a large, loose coat, and with an excellent expression, who has just come across the grass.

“ Ventured to drop in,” says Colonel Eyre, in his jerky style. “ Heard the balls going as I went across the short cut through your place a minute ago, and couldn't resist them.” He looks

at her in his quiet way. Was it the balls he couldn't resist?

"So really glad you have come," says Mrs. Egerton, speaking rapidly, and feeling horribly ashamed of the colour that has risen to her pretty cheeks; she'd have been more ashamed if she had *dared* to call it a blush,—a blush at her age! What nonsense! But how strange his coming to-day! Nearly every man in the place (there are very few of them) seems to have come to-day. Could William Eyre *too* have heard that the Squire would be away this afternoon!

Madge, with her eyes alight, has flung herself (tired out from trying to defeat her aunt) on to the grass, where Victor Mowbray swiftly follows her. Vincent is still talking in her soft, low, plaintive tones to Cedric; yet sometimes, as she speaks, she looks round her, as if wondering—uncertain.

The footman has brought out the tea, and arranged it conscientiously under the spreading chestnut tree, then, according to custom, has gone away. The Graces always say they "hate" servants at afternoon tea. "Let us be free from our masters for *once*." So Thomas has gracefully retired, and the teapot lies waiting mournfully.

"No one to dispense the indispensable," says Mr. O'Grady, waking from a fresh argument with Janie on cricket to note the lassitude of Mrs.

Egerton and Madge. "Then I shall rush into the fray."

"You are always in it, in my opinion," says Janie, scornfully.

"And who leads me there? Answer me that if you can. It's," severely, "not a swindle; it's a perfectly fair conundrum."

"Like yourself," says Janie, scornfully, "only you are *not* fair."

"Dreadfully rude," says Mr. O'Grady. He draws himself up, clasps his hands before him, screws up his lips, and closes his eyes. He had seen a painting of her great-grandmother in the drawing-room, and now manages to look exactly like it.

"It was *not* rude," indignantly. (Afterwards, when in a better temper, she made him do it all over again, and was delighted with the caricature of old Lady Mendare.) "I only meant that you were *dark*. And for the matter of that," warming as recollection returns to her, "you aren't fair *any* way. I'm sure that last serve of yours— Was *that* fair?"

"Better not look into it. There are lots of things, my dear Janie," says Mr. O'Grady, with anxious consideration for her youth, "that when you are *older*" (here Janie grows restive) "you had better not look into, either. But tea is exempt from those nice if rather naughty things. You may have seen that remarkable line, 'Look

not on the wine when it is red,'—nothing about sherry or champagne, by the way. But on *tea*—there is no restriction on tea. On *tea* you may always look without the faintest loss of your maiden bloom. Come, and help me to pour it out for the thirsty multitude!"

"I don't believe you know how," says Janie, who, on the head of having "discovered" him, has taken him specially in hand.

"Don't I! That's all *you* know about it. I always do it at Ballyclash."

Here he lifts and wields the teapot with the air of a master. He is indeed now as much at home with these new cousins of his as if he and they had been brought up by the same nurse.

"But your sisters?" questions Janie; "your sisters? *Don't* put in the sugar,—some people don't like it."

"No sugar! Ah, true! There are a lot of fools in the world!"

"Sugar isn't fashionable any longer."

"Just what I mean. Fashion makes fools. But as to my sisters, they never pour out tea: they haven't time."

"No time to pour out tea?"

"Not a second. They are always as busy as they can be."

Janie considers.

"They must be good girls," says she.

"They are; excellent."

"What is it?" asks Janie, diffidently, who is not specially useful in any line herself, and who is now beginning to feel lost in remorseful admiration of these "good" sisters of his of whom, he last night plaintively informed them, he had nine.

Fancy *nine* useful, busy girls in one house! Could any house contain so much virtue? It must be big! And how charming a house; how exquisitely kept, with nine useful virgins in it! And then their village—he had told them some lively stories of Ballyclash village—what a model village it must be!

"What is it?" asks she again, Mr. O'Grady seeming lost in thought. "District visiting? Working for the poor?"

"N—o," says Mr. O'Grady, thoughtfully.

"Painting, perhaps—or—drawing?"

"Not so much," says he.

"Ah, then, music?" says Janie, triumphantly.

"Well, no," says he. "They don't run much to that sort of thing."

"Then what is it?" demands Janie, nervously. "Good gracious, what *do* these excellent girls do?"

Mr. O'Grady finishes the lump of sugar he has in his mouth—it is the sixth—and says cheerfully,—

"They talk."

"Talk!"

"Yes; they are great at that. Talking is their *métier*. They never stop,—morning, noon, or night. They are past-masters at it. When one's done (which takes time) the other comes on. Married or single, they're all the same."

"Oh!" says Janie. It is the vaguest monosyllable, but it is eloquent both of intense surprise and of relief. The relief is even stronger. After all, they are *not* so very superior. It is always odious to hear of people who could give you points where the virtues are concerned. "Married or—— Then some of them are married?"

"A few, I am grateful to say. Four of 'em. But it doesn't count. They talk *more* now, if possible."

"Four! That leaves five?"

"I think so; yes," adding it carefully up on his fingers, "four and five *do* make nine. Go up one, Jane. Fancy doing it in a hurry like that. Who taught you the trick?"

"Stuff!" says Janie, whose manners leave a good deal to be desired. "Five still unmarried, then?"

"Yes; but it isn't their fault. I say, Mrs. Egerton, aren't you coming along here? The tea is growing positively *black*. No one's nerves—not even Janie's—will run to it soon."

Mrs. Egerton, to whom this shout finds its way imperfectly, rises slowly and nods a smiling

acquiescence to him. Colonel Eyre rises with her.

“Such a nice boy!” breathes she to Eyre in a sort of *sotto voce* way. It has occurred to her of late that it is delightful to have little confidences with the colonel. “A sort of cousin of the girls, you know. Irish—very Irish, but enchanting. I assure you I am half in love with him already.”

“I hope not,” says Colonel Eyre. He gives her a quizzical glance that has under it something of earnest meaning. “At all events, I hope the second half will be found missing.”

Mrs. Egerton laughs, and a rather heightened colour comes into her face that makes her ten years younger. She turns towards the tea-table, he following.

“Not *their* fault,” Janie is saying, a little disgustedly. Every one is still a long way off. “Do you mean to tell me they *try* to get married?”

“It’s not so much that——” begins he, guardedly.

“Oh! but it must be,” says Janie, who is now revelling in the thought that, after all, it is she who is superior to his sisters, not they to her. She, at all events, has never tried to get married.

“Well, it isn’t, really,” says he. “Though with regard to the others——” Here he pauses, and abstains as it were from details, though with evident pain to himself.

"Then what is it?" asks Janie, austere-ly. He may defend the remaining five sisters as well as he can, *if* he can. But she knows. Try to get married! Odious girls! "Why don't you speak? Facts for *me*,—I like facts!"

"Do you?" says Mr. O'Grady, who has now been doing wonders with the macaroons. "Well, the facts in this case are, that my remaining five sisters are still in the *nursery*!"

A long, *long* pause.

"So young as that?" asks Janie, presently, in a rather stifled tone.

"It's unconscionable, isn't it? They," with a jovial air, "are very nearly as young as I am."

"You! Nonsense. Why, you must be——"

"I'm not, I assure you. I sha'n't be that until my next birthday."

"Be what?"

"What you were going to say."

"But what was that?"

"Fourteen."

"Don't be so stupid," cries Janie, almost fiercely. "Am I a fool or a baby, do you think?"

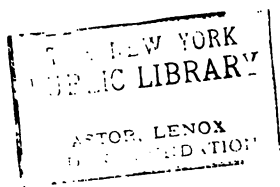
"The last for choice," says Mr. O'Grady. "There, keep your hair on! Have a macaroon?"

"I hate macaroons! Fourteen, indeed. Why you must be quite twenty-two!"

"Janet," says Mr. O'Grady, solemnly, who has now begun to tackle the hot cakes, "if you



"FACTS FOR ME—I LIKE FACTS."



continue as you have begun, you will end by being a charming woman. My last birthday made me twenty-three; and when one is getting into the sere and yellow leaf as I am, it is a distinct delight to hear from a truthful source that one doesn't look within ten years of one's age."

"*One* I made it."

"Don't spoil it! don't spoil it! Oh! here you are at last, Mrs. Egerton. Sugar? No? *Your* life can't be worth living. Vincent, come and sit by me."

The blind girl has come up with Cedric; but now, seeing her a little nervous, Batty slips his arm through hers, and leads her, with an absurd jest or two, but a steady hand and the greatest tenderness, to a garden seat upon his right, where after a moment Tom Brande takes a place beside her.

CHAPTER IX.

“Loke who that is most vertuous alway,
Prive and apert, and most extendeth ay
To do the gentil dedes that he can,
And take him for the gretest gentilman.”

It is late when Victor Mowbray, having said good-bye to his hostess, goes quickly on his way homewards, along the happy summer lanes that lead to Braystown,—a corruption of Mowbraystown,—where he lives in his uncle's absence. His heart is on fire as he walks. Never has the world seemed so fair to him as to-night, never has the sky seemed so rich in beauty, never has *she* seemed so near to him!

His childhood had been so singularly joyless that a touch of such wild happiness as comes to him now stirs his heart to extravagant depths. Since he had been unwillingly received by his uncle, Lord Mowbray, he had been kindly treated enough, and every advantage given to him in the way of education, but there had been no love thrown into the cold adoption of him; and, indeed, Lord Mowbray being a confirmed invalid, and very seldom at home, he and Victor had remained almost strangers to each other. The latter

had lost his father (Mowbray's only brother) the year he was born. Mowbray had not liked his brother,—there were few things indeed in common between them,—and the breach between the two had become hopelessly wide on George Mowbray's marriage with a girl, beautiful and good indeed, but considerably beneath him in station.

Lord Mowbray had never forgiven the *mésalliance*, but on the death of his sister-in-law, who died five years after her husband, he had been persuaded by his lawyer, an old and intimate friend of the family, to take up Victor, who was then barely six years old: the boy, though the son of detested parents, was undoubtedly heir to the title,—and very little else, unfortunately for him.

Begrudgingly, Mowbray consented to have the boy educated at his expense, and to spend his holidays at Braystown. Once or twice during these vacations he had chanced to be there himself, and had seen the little lad, but had evinced no interest in him whatsoever.

Thus the boy had grown up, unloved, uncared for, in the higher sense. He had passed through college with great distinction, and had come home to Braystown to *wait*. His heart was full of a career, but no word had been said to him of a profession. There had been talk of Mowbray's return before long, but nothing definite was

known by any one, and so Victor was waiting,—at *times* a little impatiently. To be left with a bare title, and no profession, seemed to him to fall short of justice. He had many bitter moments and many lonely ones, poor boy, and it was only on the coming of Mrs. Egerton to “The Court,” and after the acquaintanceship with the girls (very slowly developed, on account of the Squire’s crustiness), that the lad’s heart began to feel the warmth and sweetness of friendship,—a friendship that in his and Madge’s case was fast deepening into love.

* * * * *

He is now on the outskirts of the village,—a quaint, pretty nest of cottages in this dim light. And as he goes through it many a one steps out to bid him a courteous good-evening, for not only is Victor Mowbray a great favourite with all these poor people, but in his uncle’s absence they regard him as their lawful master,—the Heir of the “Big House,” as they call “Braystown,”—in spite of the fact that, though he must inherit the title, the most material part—the rentals—have been left away from him to Paul Swindon, Lord Mowbray’s other nephew and his sister’s son. The bare title, and a ridiculously small income of three hundred a year, are all that is left Victor to carry on the good old name.

“Is that you, sir?” says a woman, stepping out from her door into the roadway, where Victor is



walking along, swinging his stick to the tune of many happy thoughts—all of Madge.

“What can I do for you, Mrs. Wildon?” asks he, stopping in the centre of the small street and accosting the woman with his usual gentle courtesy.

“Only this, sir: I want you to say a word for me to his lordship about the cottage. It wants repairs badly, sir.”

“It do indeed,” says a friendly neighbour who has come out from her cottage to aid and abet Mrs. Wildon.

“Why don’t you speak to Mr. Rice?” says Victor, alluding to the agent.

“Oh, sir, I have. But he’s that hard. And I thought a word from you, sir——”

“Oh! from me,” says Mowbray, impatiently. From *him*! The last in the world to be of any use! He keeps back his thoughts, however, and goes on. “I’ll remember to tell my uncle of it when I write, but you know,” with a smile and a slight shrug of his shoulders, “I have very little influence with him.” No influence would have been nearer the mark, but he could not bring himself to say it.

“Oh, sir,” said Mrs. Wildon, “if it ain’t you, who is it as can persuade him?”

Victor pauses. Then, with a frown, but with a good deal of honesty, he says:

“Mr. Swindon.”

"Oh! laws, sir, where's the use o' he? Mr. Swindon has little fancy for the likes o' we. But *you*, sir, the heir, as it was."

"Oh, no; anything but that," says the young man, hastily.

"But ye'll have the owd name, sir; you know you will," says the friendly neighbour. "And, knowing *that*, his lordship will listen to you."

This admirable woman has been joined by many others, until now nearly half the village is present; all arguing in their different ways not only the necessity for improvements in Mrs. Weldon's cottage, but in their own. It is a most orderly gathering, and very respectable, if one excepts a tall, gaunt lad, who, standing upon the outskirts of the small crowd, lounges idly in and out of it,—though evidently not *of* it. There is a city look about him,—a look of the back slums, a look of the waif and stray who has for years kept himself by his wits from dying of absolute hunger. *Now* this keen, hungry look—the look of the creature who has never had *enough* to eat, and who has known what starvation means from the very hour of his birth—is accentuated.

Gaunt, reckless, steeped in crime and misery, this lad of about eighteen stalks amongst the villagers, into whose midst he has dropped to-day out of his many wanderings, to drift away again to-morrow, God knows where; always with that shadow of vice and misery covering him as with

a garment. It is, by the way, the most noticeable one he has on. The more tangible ones—that barely hide his emaciated limbs—are mere rags, hanging together only by those extraordinary devices that are known to all vagabonds, and to them alone.

The little crowd is still entreating Victor to do something for them and for Mrs. Wildon, and he, laughing,—though a little saddened as the truth of his position, and the poverty of it, is thus forced home upon him,—is pushing his way slowly through the people, when a noise behind him,—a scuffle, and now a desperate curse,—brings him to a standstill.


What has happened? He turns, to see the haggard, wretched lad whom he had noticed a while ago on the outskirts of the crowd, held by two stalwart villagers. And now a very Babel of voices uprises.

“He’s got your purse, sir.”

“I seed him take it.”

“A jail-bird, if ever there was one.”

“A jail-bird!” Victor looks at him. Great heavens! what a face. Ghastly now, and writhing, and so intolerably wretched,—and—so awfully young! Life has only just begun for him,—what has life left to yield? Whatever it may bring him, hope surely is left out. The pallid face is wet with the sweat that grew upon it as he struggled like a wild beast with his cap-




tors,—two ordinary, stolid, well-fed men of the village who have from their childhood been brought up in virtue's ways.

The thief has drawn back to the very length of his arms, on which the men are hanging, and his mouth is fixed in a sort of defiant snarl. He looks half wild with rage and terror. Rage against his present position, perhaps; or perhaps against the fact that he was born at all. Who can say?

But his eyes, maddened, desperate, are fixed upon Victor, who indeed at this moment has become his judge and jury all in one.

The latter, turning deadly white, feels his heart sink within him. The hunted, wretched look of the unhappy lad appeals to him so strongly that it seems to cut into his heart. Homeless! friendless! loveless! A bitter wave of memory, carrying him backwards, makes him feel all at once akin to this sad sport of life, tossed thus into his pathway. He—Victor Mowbray—well clad—well cared for. *So far* not homeless, yet on the brink of it (for this very castle of Braystown, that has grown dear to him through the association of years, and that ought to be his in all fairness, will be given away from him to Swindon at Mowbray's death, with all the rest). How greatly does he differ from this young fellow? Friendless—loveless, too! No. *No—not loveless!*

A quick, warm thrill rushes through his veins.




Madge! *He* has Madge to think upon, while this poor wretch—ah! there *had* been a comparison between them before, but not now! And yet there is, for, had not the old man given in so far as to take him into his house, he, Victor Mowbray, on his mother's death, might have been left starving (as probably this boy has often starved, and starving means a fight for life, a terrible fight, that carries one through all risks, all hazards, and into the very depths of crime! Life one *will* have! Life beyond all things! So it might have come about that in his struggle for existence, he too might have become (but for his uncle's intervention) altogether such an one as this unfortunate, poor waif before him now—now staring at him with brilliant, menacing eyes.

With this, there wakes within him a touch of strange, quick sympathy for the miserable, guilty, defiant fellow. To help him! But how?

At this moment the unfortunate lad makes a last, mad effort to escape from his holders' hands, and, being defeated, breaks into a loud and sudden, awful burst of blasphemy that, coming from such young lips, seems to thrill the air with horror.

Victor, his face white and set, goes quickly up to the group.

"Let him go," says he, sternly; and the men, accustomed to obey, slowly and reluctantly loosen their grasp, leaving the culprit free. A little



murmur of surprise runs through the crowd of villagers.

As for the thief, he stands still, breathing heavily, sobbingly; his eyes—glittering, evil eyes—glancing from right to left of him as if to find a way of escape. Anything more like a caged wild thing given an unexpected chance of liberty could hardly be imagined.

“You are quite free!” says Victor, slowly, in a low, soft tone. “You can go, if you wish, anywhere. But I want you to come home with me.”

The beggar casts a suspicious glance at him. Is this a dodge? A way to trap him the more easily? He scans Victor’s features closely, cunningly, with all the awfully sad cunning of the truly wretched; and then, somehow, his head droops, his eyes sink. Victor’s beautiful face, so strong, yet so pitiful, with its expression of mingled sympathy and gentleness, has in a way frightened him. Sympathy, pity, tenderness,—they are all so strange as to be almost a terror to this miserable boy.

“You will come?” says Victor, gently.

“I don’t care!” The air is sullen, but the defiance, the rage, is gone. He looks like one mesmerized.

“Come, then.”

“‘Ome wi’ you?”

“Yes.”



"Law, sir," cries Mrs. Wildon, in a shrill treble, "to trust yourself alone wi' a born scamp like that——"

"Not a word," says Mowbray, quietly but with authority, and in silence he lays his hand upon the beggar's arm and draws him onward.

In silence, too, they reach the Castle; and in silence—the hall-door lying wide open—he leads the ragged boy over the tessellated pavements of the halls towards the library.

The boy follows him as in a dream, but as Victor opens the library door he draws back.

"Wot do 'ee want to do wi' me?" asks he with a frown.

"Only to talk to you," says Victor, in his clear voice. "Believe me, you are as free as air to come and go. But I want to know how all this came about,—to *help* you if I can. Don't refuse my help." He is so much in earnest that, though he has thrown open the door of the library, he fails to hear inside the room a slight movement,—a step or two,—a cautious opening of a door beyond, across which a screen is placed, and then a closing of this door that is only partial.

CHAPTER X.

"Sick in the world's regard,
Wretched and low."

THE thief, as though still in a half-dream, follows Victor into the library: a grand old room, made rich with treasures from all lands. Some of the books that line the walls are priceless, so is some of the statuary. Pictures there are none, except one or two on easels, as the bookcases line the walls, reaching up to the lofty ceiling. But, as if to relieve the sense of overpowering thought that these old volumes, in their open cases, seem to impress upon the air, there are in the windows, and in the many corners, light things that, though costly, redeem the room from sadness.

The corners are, indeed, specially beautiful. Porcelain jars and pots shine out from them, glinting delicately against the dark oak background as the fire strikes upon them, whilst the deep embrasures of the four large windows are glowing with scented blossoms. There is, too, here and there a touch of Oriental splendor that sits like a smile in the sombre, dear, old room.

The beauty of it all is accentuated by the middle figure in it,—the forlorn vagrant and crimi-

nal, who, in his disreputable rags, is a hideous blot upon its grandeur. The poor wretch seems to feel this! He shuffles nervously from leg to leg,—waiting, waiting always for his doom to be spoken. Even through the infatuation that has compelled him to follow Victor, he has thought of nothing, but that at the end there would be punishment. How could *he*, who had never in all his short life found mercy from any living thing, even in his own unfortunate class, expect to find mercy now from this young aristocrat.

“I have it here,” says he, slowly. “I know ye knew it all along. But what’s your game?” He pulls the purse out of his pocket and holds it out. Victor takes it in silence (it is very light) and drops it idly from hand to hand as if thinking.

“It was scarcely worth it,” says he, at last, in a low tone.

“’Ow’d I know?” replied the thief, callously. How, indeed! The purse might as well have been fat as lean, and the young heir—who, after all, is *not* the heir where the property is concerned—ought to have had a full one.

“What is your name?” asks Victor, presently.

“I don’ know,—Matt I calls mysel’.”

“Matt—what?”

“Matt nothin’,—so far as I knows on.”

There is something utterly forlorn in this statement, made with a certain sullenness. Victor’s eyes unconsciously fill with tears. Drawing

closer to the disreputable vagrant, he seats himself on the corner of the table nearest to him; there is something friendly, unconventional, in the movement, and the convicted thief glances at him from under his bent brows. So has he sat sometimes (when *allowed*) in the lowest of low public houses. "Why 'ang it! my leg often dangled down just like the leg o' this 'ere bloom-in' swell." Still distrust rages within his breast, and presently he tells himself this is but a "bit o' bluff, to git 'im."

"I suppose," says Victor, gently, "you have"—he glances at the purse—"done this before?"

"Yer all there, Gov'nor."

"Often?"

"'Tisn't often there's a chance."

"Twice, perhaps?"

"Ay!" The lad grins defiantly. He knows he is condemning himself; yet, in some strange way, he knows he cannot lie to this man who is so few, so very few years older than he.

"This is the third time, then?" says Victor, edging closer to him along the table.

"Ay."

"The third time is the charm," says Victor, smiling. He has moved even closer, and is now quite near Matt, rubbing shoulders with him almost. "I expect you have come to your turning point. But what I want to know is, why did you ever do it? Why did you do it *first*?"

The thief, twiddling with his cap, looks down.

"Come, tell me," says Victor, and suddenly he lifts his hand and lays it upon the other's arm,—that ragged, *dirty* arm. Matt starts as if Victor had struck him!

"I wanted money!" says he, hoarsely.

Victor tightens his grasp.

"And the second time!"

"I," with increasing sullenness, "wanted money."

"And *this* time?"

"Money, too!" says the wretched, ragged creature, flinging the kindly hand off his arm as though it burns him.

Victor gets to his feet; his face is pale,—he *will* see the end of this, the truth of it.

"For what?" asks he.

The boy bursts into a delirious laugh.

"For bread!" cries he, "if you'll *have* it! . . . I was hungry, I *am* hungry,—I've bin hungry all my life. I've *never* had enough to eat. Never! Never!"

There is such frightful rage, such ferocious anger in his voice as might make a strong man shudder; but Victor, going up to him, lays his hand again upon his arm.

"But you are young, you are strong. Why not work for your bread?" asks he.

"I did,—I tried; and I made money enough to keep me that way for a while. But it was

hard work, and I broke down. . . . I was but a weak chap. Then fever took me. . . . They put me in orspital an' kep me there two months. I was too weak when I came out to work again. . . . But I was hungry. . . . I took a loaf of bread: I swear to you," suddenly flashing his strange, wild eyes at Victor, "that was the first time."

"How long ago?" asks Victor, in a low tone; he is feeling now inexpressibly saddened.

"Two years."

"And after that?"

"I stole everything I could lay my hands to," says the lad, doggedly. "I'd done it once you see, an' there was no going back."

"A mad thought," says Victor. He is silent awhile. "One can often retrace one's steps," says he, presently. "*You* can! You know," quietly, "that the steps *you* are taking lead to jail."

"Ay! I know. A 'jail-bird' that fellow yonder called me. Well, ye can send me there when," insolently, "ye're done prating at me."

"*What!*" says Victor, frowning. He gets up and walks up and down the room for a minute or so without speaking. "Did you think *that* of me,—that I would keep you here to make holiday for myself out of your misfortunes? I'm not such a cad as that. I brought you here," coming to his side again, "to see what I could

do for you. I like your face—and—I shall never think about *this* again;" he points to the purse lying on the table. "Indeed," impulsively, "I'll give it to you."

"No, no," says Matt, huskily; "I can't abear the sight of it."

"Very well. I'll chuck it away somewhere, and then *neither* of us will see it again. In the mean time," taking the money out of it, "this may as well go with some more, to get you some decent clothes."

"Clothes?" The boy again turns a suspicious glance on him.

"Yes. Look here! I want you to come and live here: I'll give you some employment—say stable-boy at first, and afterwards perhaps under-groom, and so on; or, if you would rather be about myself—the man I have now is going to Australia in a few months, and in the mean time you might learn from him——"

(Here—if he had only known it—Victor's speech throws some one standing in the lobby outside the half-closed door that is guarded by the screen into silent convulsions of mirth.)

An angry exclamation from the thief has stopped him.

"What are ye coddling me for?" says he, coarsely, roughly.

"You think I don't mean it?" says Victor; "but I do. I tell you I like you, and I can sympathise

with you. I," slowly, "was very poor myself once."

"Oh, I know what the likes o' *you* call poor!" says Matt, with a rugged scorn.

"Don't mistake me," says Victor. "I was so poor at one time, so utterly without resource of any kind, that," calmly always, but now with a faint red flush rising to his forehead, "I should probably have *starved* but for my uncle, Lord Mowbray. He gave me a home here, and—every care. So, you see," anxiously, "that our cases are not altogether so dissimilar—though, of course, I know they seem so."

"Ye've 'ad some one to love ye, anyway," says Matt.

"Love me?" Victor's colour, already a little high, now grows crimson. Madge. He draws his breath quickly—then the sudden glad fear subsides. What could he know of Madge? And for the rest——

"How do you mean?" says he.

"Why, that lord ye spoke of just now."

"Lord Mowbray!" Victor's brow contracts a little, as if with pain or regret. Perhaps both. "Oh, no; *he* does not love me," says he. "He has been very kind to me. But——. However, he is so kind always, that I am sure if I write to him to say I should like you to have a place here, he will not refuse me."

"Refuse yer! No! There ain't a bloke in

the world as would refuse you anythink," says the waif, with a sudden emphasis that amounts almost to a passion.

"Oh, yes, there is," says Victor, laughing involuntarily; "many blokes, for the matter of that. But, though I don't know him very well, Lord Mowbray has, as I, of all people, have reason to know, a good heart—and I am sure he will give you a chance in the stables, or perhaps with the gamekeeper."

"'Twould be no sort of use," says the boy, with a groan. He stands shifting himself nervously from foot to foot. "If you will let me go——"

"Well, I won't," says Victor, advancing to him, and laying his hands upon his shoulders. "See here now, Matt. *Try* this offer of mine."

The lad lifts his eyes to his with a despairing refusal in them.

"Why not? I'll stand your friend."

"You! *My* friend!" A terrible laugh breaks from his throat. "Why, ye'd chuck me out in a week."

"I don't think so." Victor, still with his hands on the other's ragged shoulders, gives them a little shake. "Come, take courage. You will engage here as stable-boy?"

"You said something else," says the lad, slowly, speaking with a face that now is livid, but with eyes that seem to burn into Victor's; "something

about being near *you*. If—if I might be that—*whatever* it is——”

There is a passion of love new-born in his glance, and an entreaty that has pain in it.

“You want to be what Jones is,” says Victor. “Well,” calmly, “you shall.”

“You mean it, sir?” There is something almost terrible in the glance of the lad as he looks now at Victor. “You’ll trust me? You’ll give me back what I’ve lost?” Suddenly a bitter cry breaks from him, and he falls on the ground and clasps Victor’s knees. “Oh! my God, sir! You’ll never be sorry for this day—never, never.”

“I know it,” says Victor. It is with difficulty he keeps back his emotion. But he does conquer it, and compels himself to take, with a lighter tone, a lighter view of the situation—all for the purpose of reassuring this poor creature, against whom Fate seems to have done its worst.

“And now as to clothes,” cries he, cheerily. “It will never do for the other servants to see you like *this*. Come, I have an idea! You and I are much of a height, and I think I have some old things of mine that will suit you. But the real question is how to get them on. Neither I nor you, Matt, would like to see my future servant in anything but presentable coat and breeches. But how to manage it——”

He walks thoughtfully up and down the room, and, as he goes, his glance flings itself out of the

window to where a summer-house, little used in this empty mansion, may be seen.

"Ah! I have it!" cries he, gaily. "You shall go out there." He beckons Matt to the window and shows him, with a gesture, the summer-house. "And presently I shall bring you those old clothes of mine, and then you shall dress, and emerge from it a new man. *My man!*"

He claps the thief on the shoulder with the gayest gesture. "Now, then, buck up!" cries he, laughing.

But Matt stands as if stricken into marble. He makes an attempt to speak, but his lips refuse to give utterance to his words. At last——

"I stole yer purse," says he.

"Why, what of that?" returns Victor. "I've forgiven that."

"I might steal it again."

"Not you," heartily. "I'll trust you for that. Come now! make haste. My future servant must not be seen in clothes like these. Run out there to the summer-house—you see it?—and I'll be with you in a minute."

He draws Matt towards the open window, and the ragged fellow, worn and exhausted, goes with him so far, then stops and looks at him.

"You—you *trust* me?" says he.

"Why, yes," says Victor.

Matt stands—gazing at him—silently, terribly, as if struggling with his soul. Then, all at once,

his thoughts burst into wild, somewhat incoherent language.

“Yes, it is!” says he. “Ay! and you may bet yer life on it!” His face is now as white as a sheet. “You may trust me, sir, and to the death! If ever you want me, and I’m not there, by heaven!” cries the lad, shrilly, “I hope *I’ll* be found wanting, too, in the last day.”

CHAPTER XI

“Came it to your ears to hear
What the thin philosopher
One day, in his wisdom, said
To a great fat pudding-head?
‘Friend,’ quoth he, ‘an Arab steed,
Though he should be lean indeed,
By his quality surpasses
Any stableful of asses.’”

A SLIGHT silence reigns in the library for a few minutes after the two late occupants have left it. Then the door at the farther end—that had been but half closed—opens softly, and presently, from behind the screen, a tall, gaunt man emerges slowly. Reaching the central writing-table, he sinks heavily into the chair before it.

His face is full of complex emotions, and now it seems to grow sterner with every thought. It is a face that might have been termed noble, but for the touch of obstinacy that in a sense disfigures it. It is also a face that has the touch of death upon it.


Presently he draws a little sheaf of letters from an inside pocket, and hurriedly runs his eyes over them; three or four in all, but filled with such pungent matter as makes him wince at times. He

throws them down impatiently at last, and, rising to his feet, begins to pace up and down the room. Pshaw! why waste time over such letters, especially when their contents are writ so large upon his brain? They are all of Paul Swindon and his doings—very sorry doings! Old Stamer, the lawyer, had written them—and Stamer was just one of those men whose word it would be impossible to doubt.

Such a hideous account of the man he had chosen to make his heir,—to whom he would gladly, indeed, have left his title, if that could have been . . . The man to whom he had willed everything else certainly, to the exclusion of the lad to whose noble efforts to redeem a soul he had but just now been witness.

Lord Mowbray drops once more into his chair, and sits thinking deeply. He had arrived home only this afternoon from Mentone, without having sent word to his household as to his coming. Those accounts of Swindon had driven him back from the sunny climate, where he loved to dwell, to his own home, and on his coming he had found the house deserted, but for the servants.

Victor, as we may remember, entered the library, with his captive, without meeting a soul. Mowbray, hearing of his coming, walked quietly outside the far door and there set himself deliberately to learn something of this other nephew, to whom up to this time he had given so few



thoughts. He had not regarded the act as dishonourable. Indeed, he had not thought of it at all in that light. Sore at heart because of these stories of Paul Swindon,—so sadly sure of foundation,—he had determined to learn something *as* sure of Victor, one way or the other.

Again he looks at the letters lying on the table before him,—so damnatory, so hopelessly *true*. Black as night does Swindon's life shine against the life of this lad, Victor,—poor George's son,—against whom he had so vindictively set his heart. And this boy *must* have the title,—must carry on the good old name. But on what? A paltry three hundred a year. The only sum that it was out of his, Mowbray's, power to leave *away* from him.

He leans back in his chair, and an extra grey-ness grows upon the face that is always so bloodless,—so suggestive of dissolution,—*near*! What was this Stamer had said of Paul? . . . Oh! shameful! *Shameful*! What if he, Mowbray, had made a mistake, after all; had delivered his inheritance into hands so dyed with dishonour, that never again could a Mowbray hold up his head. At first, long, long ago, it had seemed impossible to him to leave the property to the son of a woman whose father had been but a draper in a small country town,—but now . . .

All at once Victor's face comes back to him, and again he sees him as he was but a while ago,

standing beside the wretched, ragged boy, pleading with him, comforting him. And all so earnestly, yet so naturally, without a suspicion of cant or self-righteousness. There had been *nothing*, beyond the bare longing to help someone, who had nothing but the


“Blackness of darkness before him :
Lurid with lights that lead only to uttermost hell.”

And what was it Victor had said about *him* to that vagrant?

“He has been very good to me.”

Mowbray’s heart contracts as not only the words, but Victor’s face, as he said them, comes back to him. He had been much struck by the young man’s nobility of face, and struck, too, by the very singular resemblance he bore to himself. Looking at him through the half-closed doorway, it had seemed to Mowbray as though he was looking on his own past self,—only glorified!

Has he been “*good to him*”? In the letter, perhaps,—certainly not in the spirit. How coldly he has treated this boy who has so many elements of true greatness in him, and who might carry on for many generations, in honour and distinction, the name that belongs to him. He had not even borne malice against *him*—Mowbray—the only relation he has, and the one who



has most disgracefully neglected him in the smaller ways, that are so often the bigger ways of life.

“‘I should probably have starved but for my uncle, Lord Mowbray!’”

“‘My uncle, Lord Mowbray,’ is hardly to be thanked for that saving of him from starvation. But for old Stamer, ‘my nephew, Victor Mowbray,’ might have been dead and buried through starvation long ago!’” Mowbray’s brow grows damp, and a painful colour darkens his face. Tut! why should he distress himself thus? He will remember no more. . . . But even as he comes to this decision, a last sentence rings upon his ear.

“Oh! no, he does not love me!”

True. True. The son of George, whom he had so hated (and perhaps with some small reason). No,—he had not loved the boy. He does not even now love him. But, for all that . . .

This lad—George’s boy—is heir to the title. . . . Is it right to let the heir get the title only, with nothing to keep it up with? George’s boy! His mind goes back to those old days when George and he were children together, and when—though they had fought *then*, too,—they had still been the keenest allies. He sighs heavily!

At this moment the sound of footsteps in the garden outside disturbs his thoughts, and he goes languidly to the window. The figure of a tall,

slight young man goes past as he looks out. Evidently some one in a hurry, and quite as evidently Victor. Victor Mowbray is, indeed, walking as fast as he can, though to hurry under *his* circumstances is difficult! He is armed and loaded! One side of him is packed with clothing of all sorts; the other carries a bag half open, out of which the knuckle of a ham and a loaf of bread are protruding. From one of his pockets a bottle is stretching out its neck, and from the other the handle of a hair-brush.

"Evidently he has forgotten nothing," says Lord Mowbray to himself, with a half-amused, half-cynical air.

He follows Victor's flight across the garden. It seems full of deceit. There is no doubt at all about the fact that he inclines to the shadowed places, and gives a wide berth to those from which he can be seen from the kitchen windows, that control one side of this small garden.

Mowbray breaks into a burst of laughter, to which he has long been a stranger.

"He's been stealing," says he, "from Mason." (Mason is the cook.) "Evil communications. . . . He has been taking lessons from his pupil. Ah! But what a kind heart it is! What a nature! *Once* I felt like that. . . . Good to the poor, the wretched,—I would to God I could feel like *that* again. Like that *boy* again." He casts a last glance at Victor's departing figure. He has now

entered the summer-house, where Matt is awaiting him, and is lost to sight.

* * * * *

Lord Mowbray is still sitting in the library when the door is flung open and Victor enters.

"I didn't hear until this moment that you had come," cries he, impetuously. "I'm awfully sorry. If I had known you were coming, I should have been at home to receive you."

"Yes?" Mowbray shakes hands with him, retaining Victor's hand for a moment in his own. "You had other things to see to apparently."

"Other things?" Victor hesitates and flushes slightly. *His* thoughts have flown to Madge. Could his uncle have known that he spent the afternoon with her,—have heard of—of . . .

"Waifs and strays, for example," says Mowbray, with a faint smile. "I don't mind telling you that I was here when you brought in that extremely grimy member of society; and so anxious was I for my bric-à-brac,—or something else,—that I stayed out there," pointing to the far door, "to see what would happen. Nothing *happened*. But I heard a good deal."

"You heard?"

"For one thing, that you are prepared to take as a body-guard a most notorious young scoundrel. A fellow whose acquaintance began with you in such a friendly way that he positively mistook *your* pocket for his own."

Victor laughs.

"It does sound rather Quixotic as *you* put it," says he. "But, do you know, I believe in the fellow, in spite of all the damnatory evidence against him."

"That's all very well," says Mowbray. "You can be as modern a Don Quixote as you like, so far as you yourself are concerned; but I think you might have given a little consideration to me and my household."

"To you?" Victor knits his brow.

"To my silver, anyway. A young person taken in the act of stealing a purse is hardly the one to be given 'free access' to a house where spoons and forks, and a few better things, are lying loose, courting his admiration."

"The silver!" Victor's face falls. "I declare," says he, "I never thought of that!"

"Young philanthropists never do think of anything, do they? Well, never mind. *I* sha'n't think of it, either. I give you *carte blanche* about your *protégé*. Let us pray he will not disappoint us both!"

"I may engage him, then?" says Victor. "I was going to write to you about him. I think—I believe, he will prove honest. I have a sort of sympathy with him."

"Did that arise out of your expedition across the garden a while ago?" says Mowbray. "I saw you go, laden with golden grain,—grain

stolen, I am afraid." A grim but not unkind smile crosses his face,—it is the first smile that Victor has ever seen there *for him*, and it gives him pause. . . . He draws his breath quickly. If—if only this sole relation of his would learn to like him.

"You saw me," says he, with a little nervousness, born of his late thought. "You see, I thought he would feel it keenly being seen dressed like that; and besides," laughing in spite of himself, "he was so confoundedly hungry that he would have disgraced himself in the hall below. So I took all I could find, without cook's knowledge, and fed him down *there*," pointing to the old summer-house. "Poor chap, he was starving; I couldn't bear to see it."

He breaks off abruptly, as if at some too cruel memory.

"You said something a moment ago to me, Victor," says his uncle presently, in a low tone: "that you felt a sort of sympathy with this unfortunate boy. You said the same thing to *him*. You meant?" . . . He asks the question, his eyes fixed on Victor's. It is a command.

"Well, sir," says Victor, with a touch of dignity that sits very well upon him, "it seemed to me that but for certain circumstances *I* might have been as *he* is to-day."

"And those circumstances?"

"Your goodness to me!" returns Victor, in a

low voice. There is nothing effusive in his tone—it is even a little cold.

It had been goodness, *not* kindness!

A silence ensues, that lasts for many minutes.

"I wish we had known each other earlier," says Mowbray at last, and with unmistakable difficulty.

"If you will let me know you now," says Victor, turning quickly to him.

"Too late, I fear!" says Mowbray, smiling somewhat painfully. "*My* days are numbered, *yours* are but beginning; still, for the rest of the time—we may surely be friends." He holds out his hand, and Victor takes it eagerly. Oh! if only he had known him like this *before* this.

After a while another thought presses on him, and something in his eyes, something of longing, makes itself known to Mowbray.

"Come, tell me what is in your mind," says the older man, gently.

"I have wanted for a long time to ask you about a profession," says the latter, quickly; "I have rather set my mind upon engineering."

Mowbray remains silent, and sits as if thinking. Then: "You have finished your course at college?"

"Yes."

"Honours?"

"Yes," with a certain honest pride. "But what I want to say is," his eyes fixed with dis-

tinct anxiety on Mowbray, "that I should like now to start for myself in life. You have been very good to me, but——" He hesitates.

"I can't live forever?" Mowbray looks at him from under lowered brows. He frowns slightly, but Victor takes both glance and frown bravely.

"That thought was not in my mind, sir. But no man can live forever. And every man must look out for himself." He flings up his head.

"Rightly said," says Mowbray, smiling, but sighing. "And so you want to leave the old place? Well—not yet Victor, I beg you. Give me time——" He pauses, and again that thoughtful look grows upon his face—a thought that leads him to his death, that he knows is near. A very little time is all he can ask of any man. "Promise me to stay here for the present, at all events. You can study; and," with a sudden glimpse of humour, "you can employ yourself, and give your philanthropic principles full play in looking after your *protégé*. By the bye, talking of philanthropy, you are not the only fool in that line who lives here. You will have to look to your laurels, I can tell you, if you mean to beat the record in mad deeds of that sort on which you have embarked. I hear young Brande is here now—the eldest one—Cedric. He is quite an enthusiast—a sort of latter-day Samaritan. He will run you very hard, I can tell you."

"Oh! as to that," says Victor, laughing, "I

don't go in for that sort of thing. I've got enough to do, as a rule, in looking after myself. The Home Missionary business would bore me to death. This one individual case—Matt's case—has taken me, I confess,—but rather because I fancied the poor chap's face than anything else, I am afraid."

"Well, I hope he won't disappoint you."

"Do you know," says Victor, with sudden, strange certainty, "I feel he won't. In a sort of queer way I *know* it. Your silver," smiling, "will be quite safe so far as *he* is concerned."

"It is very romantic," says Mowbray, dwelling with pleasure on the young man's charming face. "I thought we had outlived the romantic age. Even in Italy—the home of it—it is dying out fast; yet here in prosaic England I find myself face to face with it again. To make the story perfect, this 'discovery' of yours ought to do you a good turn in kind."

"Perhaps he will," says Victor, little thinking how true his words are likely to prove.

"Have you met Cedric Brande, or his brother Tom?" asks Mowbray, presently. "I knew the old Lord Sloane very well, and also Reginald Brande, the father of these young men. The latter died two or three years ago. His brother, the present Lord Sloane, is a big, stout fellow. He's in China at present, I think. Bad situation for him if this war creates a row in the interior.

However, perhaps it will prove a mere flash in the pan. The Chinese are, as a rule, all 'talkee, talkee,' and no performance, and it seems likely that these plucky little Japanese will bring them to book pretty shortly. Cedric, the elder boy, must be his heir. He struck me as being somewhat of a visionary, when I met him in Florence last year, and I hear my judgment of him was a right one. Tom, the younger fellow, was more to my mind, and certainly more practicable for every-day purposes. You have met them?"

"To-day, for the first time, at 'The Court.' He and his brother were there. I agree with you about the brother; I much prefer him to Cedric. I was talking to—to Madge about him, and she thought as I did."

"Did she?" says Lord Mowbray. "I'm not surprised," looking at Victor's handsome face. "But, in the mean time, who is Madge? I feel as if I should like to agree with *her*." The tone is half-bantering, wholly earnest.

A hot, dark colour flushes Victor's face.

"She is Miss Grace. You know Mr. Grace, I think."

"I do, indeed. A very old friend of mine. So old that I feel I must call upon him as soon as possible. I sha'n't stand on ceremony with him, as my time here is short, and I shall have to go back to the south almost immediately. To-morrow I'll go and see him, I think. Perhaps," with

a quizzical glance, "you would like to go with me?"

Their eyes met. The younger man is still a little confused, but there is something in Mowbray's face that compels him to confidence.

"*I* should," says he.

At this they both laugh.

"I think you had better go and see to your *protégé* now," says Mowbray, still laughing.

CHAPTER XII.

"The salt marsh bears no spikenard,
Waste on it no good seed !
Kindness to evil people
Does good ones an ill deed.'

WHEN left alone Mowbray's face changes. Again he sinks into deep thought; again the knowledge of Paul Swindon's unworthiness rises before him in all its horrible clearness. No! never shall he desecrate the halls of this old house,—this honourable house,—by his presence, and the presence of. . . . His latest detestable act has damned him for ever in the old Lord's sight.

His mind goes instinctively from these indignant thoughts of Swindon to Victor. How upright, how wholesome, the latter seems beside the nephew he had selected as his heir. But that is all over now. *He* has quite decided: and in *time!* He sighs. There is so *little* time.

What a desirable heir Victor is. He had been conscious of some anxiety when the boy had blushed as he did over Madge Grace's name. He, Mowbray, had not understood for a moment, but afterwards he had known, and it had been a relief to him, after all the bad news of Paul, to


hear that "the lad," as he calls him, has fallen in love openly, happily, with Madge Grace, the daughter of an old friend, a girl of good birth and social standing!

But his will made in favour of Paul! Well, it is not too late yet to cancel that.

He goes to the writing-table, and pulls forward paper and ink. With an impatient hand he turns up the lamp. Then writes, writes fiercely for quite an hour. Always impulsive, he now feels as if what he has got to do can never be done quickly enough.

Presently it is finished, and he flings himself back in his chair, thinking. Yes, it is well done; he feels that. And now for witnesses. Happening to glance out of the window, still open to let in the cool airs of the night, he sees coming across the garden the waif that Victor has elected to be his future henchman. A waif transformed! Victor's old suit seems to fit him to a nicety, and Victor's old hair-brush has done wondrous things to his head.

Perhaps Victor's impromptu meal, that was *not* old, has done even more for him. Anyway, he looks quite set up; and if there is about him the air of one who is walking in strange places, and is conscious of it, it is tempered with a sort of courage born of that late much wanted food. Hunger is at end, and the wretched boy feels himself once again able to meet his fellows.



There is something more, too, in his breast that helps him to this courage. His wild, passionate nature, that has a good deal of gypsy blood in it, is on fire with gratitude to the man who had held out a hand to lift him from the sloughs of life to a firm landing place, who had, in the face of his very crime, given him a chance of holding up his head again among his kind.

Mowbray going to the window beckons him by a finger to come in, and Matt, who had been told by Victor of the old Lord's return, obeys the gesture at once.

"You can write your name, perhaps?" says Mowbray.

"I can that," says Matt, sullenly, and with few flowers of language.

"You can write it here, then?" indicating the spot where a witness would sign a will.

"What's it for?" asks the waif.

Lord Mowbray looks at him.

"For Mr. Mowbray," says he.

"Then I won't," backing away from him.

"If it's against the young master——"

"Why, it's *for* him, fool!"

"Ah! If you'll swear to that."

"I shall with pleasure," says Mowbray, laughing. This new importation of Victor's is abominably rude, but his honest gratitude, that shows through his determination to defy even him, Mowbray, because of it, amuses the old Lord.

Anyway, there is nothing cringing about the lad.

"It is certainly nothing against the 'young master,' as you call him," says he, with a faintly satirical smile, that yet has great kindness in it. "If you sign this paper here," pointing to it, "it will give happiness to him *of a sort*." With a sharp sigh: Had money or position given happiness to *him*?

"And before long, too," sadly. "He won't have long to wait for it, boy,—not long."

The sad premonition of death is already upon him.

Matt has come forward and has taken the pen in his fingers.

"You're sure," says he, with a searching glance at Mowbray, "that it's all for the good of *him*?"

"For my nephew? Yes."

"I wish I could read," says Matt, ungracious to the last, and hesitating still. "But I can't; all I can do is to sign my name."

"A most useful accomplishment; and better than being able to sign another's," says Mowbray, dryly. Especially in *his* state of life, thinks he to himself, forgery bringing its own dividends, at times. "You must, however, wait a moment; there is another preliminary to be gone through." He rings the bell, and presently the butler appears. A stout, stolid man, with few ideas. Butlers never have any ideas of their

own. Even so long ago as Joseph's time they could not work out an idea on their own dreams; they had to get Joseph to help them.

"I want you to sign this," says Lord Mowbray, pointing to the paper before him.

"Yes, my Lord," says Mason, who, besides having no ideas, is much too well-mannered a servant to question an act of his superiors.

"You can sit here," says Mowbray, slowly.

"Thank you, my Lord." Mason slowly and heavily seats himself in his master's own chair.

"It is my will," says Mowbray.

"Very good, my Lord," says Mason, and without further preamble signs his name.

"Now, you," says Mowbray, nodding at Matt. The latter comes forward, leans down, grapples with his pen as though it is a firearm of some sort warranted to go off at a moment's notice, and at last signs his name in such a style as precludes the idea of forgery of any sort at any time. Forgery, indeed, seems very much out of it; practically impossible, in fact.

The signature, for all that, is a sound one; and, as a curious critique on Mowbray's suspicious thought, one very difficult of imitation!

"Thank you," says Mowbray, with a general expression of courtesy to both men. Then—"Bring me some coffee, Mason."

As Mason withdraws, Lord Mowbray rises to his feet. He has folded the paper just signed,


and holding it lightly between his finger and thumb looks at Matt.

"It will be necessary that you should say nothing of this to your master," begins he. He waits—he is undecided—now, at the last moment (he has all his life been undecided), he would willingly have undone his last deed. If later on he should wish to discard Victor as his heir. . . . He has perhaps been too sudden; too precipitate. Not Swindon, *certainly*. Swindon shall never be his heir; but there may be others, and it is well to leave a margin to prevent false hopes.

"Not a word! Do you hear? Of this paper. If you speak, it will do Mr. Mowbray probably a greater injury than if you had never known of it. After my death. . . . *Then*—and I have told you, you will not have long to wait, but meantime, if you do speak, it will be to his hurt, and his alone."

He makes a gesture, imperious, hasty, that the waif is swift to obey; but old instincts are hard to conquer, and once behind the trellis work on the balcony outside, and with a hole in that verdant mass of beauty through which he can see what is going on in the room he has just quitted, he stops short, and gives himself up to the moment.

It is a disgraceful pose, yet there is something of a great loyalty in it, too. *Self* is not in it, at all events. The young master! What is it the old man means about him?



He watches the "old man" assiduously. . . . *Now* he has folded up the paper, and now he goes towards the wall over there. Mystery seems full upon the air. Matt remembers suddenly his promise to Lord Mowbray not to speak, and the old Lord's hint that if he *did* speak it might mean ill to his patron. No doubt Mowbray had given way to a touch of cynical humour when he said that, but the boy had not understood him, and was struck with it. What he *does* understand, however, is the going of Mowbray to the wall over there.

He goes so straight for it, that Matt grows suddenly conscious of a keen sense of disappointment. Why, he can't be thinking of marching through it, can he? The "old man" must be mad, and therefore his promise that the signed paper will do good to the young master will after all come probably to nothing. . . . To march deliberately towards a blank wall!

Even as he so scorns Mowbray, the latter raises his hand and touches the seemingly impregnable wall. Upon a small red flower his finger presses, and Matt leans forward, just for curiosity's sake, just to see how far "th' old fool" will go, and lo! all at once the solid wall moves, opens.

A door, a small door, sways open, worked by a secret spring, no doubt. Matt leans still more forward, the veins growing on his forehead. Uneducated, superstitious, this opening of a wall at

a touch seems horrible to him. And "the old man," if he could do that, why, he could do many other things. And he had threatened him, that if he spoke of this written paper before his death, he would avenge it on the young master! He knows at once, in a dull sort of way, that he will never speak till then.

He is watching always! When the wall opened, Mowbray had seemed to put his head into it, and presently had come forth again, dragging a paper with him. This he now tears into many parts. The waif, watching him, begins to tremble. It seems like the act of a Demon!


What is he? Who?

And now he has taken up the paper he, Matt, has just signed, and lays it in the mysterious opening from which he had taken the strange parchment he had only just this moment torn into shreds.

After this he touches another part of the wall, and in a flash the wall is as it always was . . . not a break,—not a suspicion of secrecy about it!

It is too much for Matt. He draws back with a pale and frightened face. He has heard of magicians! But to *see* one! He creeps silently away, but the memory of that red flower has entered into his brain.

Mowbray coming back to his chair, a lounging one this time, flings himself into it and lights a cigar.



This thing done, this will witnessed, he knows a sense of relief. But now Stamer should have it in his possession so as to make the whole thing sure. But, Stamer! That is what oppresses him. Why, Stamer can't be got at for quite a month or so, and this damnable climate will send him back to Italy again in a week. He and Stamer had crossed each other on his return this time. Caught a mere glimpse one of the other, a bare half hour, but long enough for Mowbray to understand the drift of Stamer's letters about Swindon, and a great deal more. Stamer was to be relied on all through; he knew his man.

Well, it is a little unfortunate his being away now. But he can write to him. He sinks back into his chair, giving himself up to the soothing claims of his cigar. But suddenly, once again, his thoughts spring into active life.

By Jove! he *must* write to him. He had forgotten the chief thing. *That Swindon* knows of the secret hole in the wall, and that Stamer does not. And that not only that Stamer, but every soul in the world is ignorant of it except Swindon! Yes, he will write at once, once *he* gets away from this hideous climate, and Stamer has come back to it. Let's see! Stamer in those hurried moments had said he would be home in a month, certainly. Well, once he, Mowbray, is in Italy, he will write from there. He moves restlessly. He would have liked to write to-

night, to tell him of this secret place in the wall, that for centuries has been held sacred in the family, but Stamer's address is unknown to him. However, there is plenty of time; and at the end of the month Stamer will surely be home by then.

His thoughts break and go off to Victor. An ideal heir! And of his own blood, too. A tall young man, and handsome. And with such a kind heart, bound to be an ideal landlord. Yes, the old place will be safe in his hands. His doubts fade away. He feels *quite* sure, for the moment. He wakes from his dreaming with a start.

"That you, Victor?"

"Yes. And only one lamp?"

"Don't call for any more just yet; I like the twilight. It is soothing. Sit here, I want to talk to you. What is it you want to be?"

"Engineer," replies Victor, promptly.

"Engineer, eh? well. . . . Do you know what you are going to be?"

"No, sir."

"My heir!"

"*Your heir!*" Victor grows suddenly very white.

"I have said it," says Mowbray, in his dictatorial manner. "And *as* my heir, you will stay at home and look after the property."

Victor makes a movement. To be ordered

thus even by one's own. The young head is flung up, the brows are brought together. There is extreme hauteur in the whole pose.

Mowbray likes it.

"Nay, lad," says he, "don't take it like that. I'm an old man now, and I have seen many of the ways of life. And my own ways have not been to my soul's salvation. But of all things that weigh upon me, now, as I stand looking death in the face, it is this one,—that I have not done my duty to the people who belong to me. An absentee landlord I have been from first to last; in part, I couldn't help it; but whether the landlord can help it or not, its dam—ahem—terribly bad for the tenants. And I've made up my mind that the one who comes after me shall have *their* interests in view."

"But——" Victor breaks in, as if bewildered. "Paul—Paul Swindon——"

"Your faith in Paul Swindon must be greater than mine if you think he would look after them,—your faith or your ignorance! Enough of him! No, I'll have no spendthrift."

He drops back in his chair as if overcome, but presently rouses again.

"That's all over," says he, feebly. "But swear, boy, swear, that you will be just and fair in all your dealings with these poor devils under you."

His language is not perhaps as special as it

might have been, but there is kindly meaning under it that Victor catches and understands.

“I swear!” says he.

When he is gone, Mowbray leans back in his chair. Yes, he is charming, charming. He must certainly write to Stamer at the end of the month.

CHAPTER XIII.

"What makes this world to be so variable
But lust that folk have in dissension."—CHAUCER.

"My dear John! If *my* beliefs clash with *your* desires, I really can't help it!" says Mrs. Egerton. "I am absolutely *certain* that Cedric Brande is in love with Vincent. He is rather visionary, I allow,—a somewhat impossible person in many ways, but a thoroughly good young man, and—an elder son. I have noticed his manner towards her, and in a thousand ways it has come home to me that he is perfectly devoted to her. Yes, devoted is the word! I indeed have also thought that——"

She checks herself abruptly: the half-formed, very unsatisfactory, and almost cruel fancy, that Tom Brande also is in love with the blind girl, is one she cannot bear to dwell upon.

"Stuff and nonsense!" says the Squire, gruffly, looking up from his bed of pansies on which he has been bestowing weeks of care—pansies are his hobby. "Your mind is *running* on marriage, it seems to me!"

He had not meant it, but all at once Mrs. Egerton's handsome face grows rosy red. A thought

of big William Eyre, and what he had hinted at last evening, as she walked back with him from the Feverils, rushes through her mind.

"Everything is nonsense with you, it seems!" says she, with a most unusual touch of sharpness. "But I repeat what I say, and—" her whole air is softening again to a great gentleness, "I am glad of it. That poor, sweet child: I had thought of her as cut off from any affection outside her home. I had feared that her affliction would put her beyond the pale of such joys as wife and motherhood must bring—but *now* . . . If Cedric Brande loves her, and she loves him——"

"And *I* have often thought, Henrietta," says the Squire, uplifting himself, trowel in hand, and regarding her with a fell eye, "that there was a *strain* of madness in you. Now I believe you are *raging*."

"You can think as you like about *me*," says Mrs. Egerton, very justly offended. "I assure you I don't care a jot about your opinion one way or the other. But I must insist upon your considering your daughter's happiness."

"It's impossible, impossible, I tell you," roars the Squire, enraged by her air and her words alike. "*Vincent* to marry! Oh! be sensible if you *can*, my good girl!" Armed with his agricultural weapon, he prances up and down the garden path, declaiming loudly. "Marriage!

To dream of marriage for Vincent! Married!—A wife—Vincent!”

“Well, and why not?” demands Mrs. Egerton, with severity. “*I* may be a raging lunatic, as you so politely suggest, but she has all her senses round her; and why should she not taste the joys of life as well as another. If God has refused her sight, He has not at all events refused her the chance of loving and being loved!” Here the Squire stops his angry walk, and taking courage she goes up to him and lays her hand upon his arm. “Look here, John! Just think of it! Is she, who has been, because of her blindness, denied so much that makes life sweet, for that *very reason* to be denied all the rest,—the Best!”

“But she—my poor, poor girl.” The words seem to break from the Squire’s heart. He stands silent, thinking. His eyes are on the ground, but his mouth is sad, and his whole air dejected. “A wife! A blind wife! Who would desire her?”

“Many,” says Mrs. Egerton, stoutly. “If this young man wishes to marry her, John, and she is willing to marry him——” Once again she hesitates; little actions, little expressions of Vincent’s coming back to her, actions and expressions that had nothing to do with Cedric! So strange they are, so hard to *place*, that she never can be really sure. What a terrible pity it is that

the two brothers speak so much alike. Their voices are twins, indeed!

And—*does* Vincent want to marry Cedric? Oh! yes—she does—she must. Mrs. Egerton calls to mind a scene or two where Vincent had gone eagerly forward to meet Cedric. *Was* it Cedric she thought she was going to meet?

It must have been. It must. She—it was only her stupid imagination that . . .

"I really think she likes him," she goes on. "And if so, surely you, surely *no one*, ought to interfere . . . to place obstacles in the way of her happiness."

The Squire flings the trowel into the pansy bed.

"I had never thought of such a thing for *her*."

"My dear John, do any of us ever think of anything for anyone else. Even for one's nearest and dearest?"

Mrs. Egerton, as she says this, loses herself a little, and goes back to those doubts of a moment ago.

Vincent! Is she in love with Cedric? *His* voice—his voice she seems indeed to love—but Cedric's voice and Tom's are so fatally alike . . .

She stops the flow of this thought with almost angry force; and *still* angry asks herself a last question. If the girl could see! Which of these two voices would she choose?

"If I thought," says the Squire, in a queer,

jerky way, as if ashamed of himself for giving in, "that it would be for her good to encourage this young man—I—why I——"

Mrs. Egerton breaks into his speech vehemently.

"There must be something more in life for a beautiful girl deprived of sight than a mere existence. Who wants to live, only to walk and eat! Not Vincent! She is hardly one to be satisfied with a colourless life."

"Colourless. I don't know what you mean," says the Squire, hotly. "She seems very happy here with—with us."

"So far! But the child grows to the woman," says Mrs. Egerton. "And I don't think you understand Vincent. She is a girl who, if sight had been left to her by heaven, would have been one of the lightest-hearted things on earth in her own sweet innocent way. And—" she hesitates—then compels herself to speak again. "John! I have sometimes thought of late that—that—she may not be hopelessly blind after all. There is Landor," naming a specialist about sight. "He——"

"What do you mean?" asks the Squire, frowning.

"What I say," persists she, with determination. "I cannot help thinking that a girl who at five years old lost her sight through scarlatina need not be hopelessly blind."

"A kind fancy, Henrietta, but without foundation," says the Squire, sadly. "Give it up. To raise hopes only to destroy them, is the worst of all brutalities. Let us change the subject."

"As you will," says she, a little disheartened. She had long ago decided on doing the best she could for the girls, and now to be thrown back is bitter to her. Poor, dear Bertha's girls. If their father will do nothing for them, why she must! Her duty to her dead sister seems quite clear. And if he will not listen to Vincent's claims, there is still another daughter, Madge——.

"By-the-by, I met William Eyre yesterday," says the Squire, suddenly. "He seems to come here a good deal of late, eh? But, after all, I don't mind him. He's a sensible fellow in his own line."

Mrs. Egerton gives him a little glance and shrugs her shapely shoulders.

"So sensible! Are you sure? When you think he is a little *épris* with your Madge?"

"Tut, I made a mistake there."

"You acknowledge you can make a mistake, then? Come, John! you are growing really too magnanimous. We sha'n't be able to live up to you soon."

"What I say is, that he is far too sensible a fellow to think of marrying at his age!"

"*His* age! One would think he was a Methuselah."

"He's a widower," says the Squire, with a resounding sigh—his thoughts have gone back to his "sweetheart"—"and that is worse!"

"Oh, no! And as to his not marrying again, I don't know about that," says she, demurely. "However, as we are on the subject of marriage, and as you say my mind is never off it, give me your ear for a moment! There is a word or two I would say to you about Madge. You know I gave you a little hint sometime ago about her, and that dear Victor Mowbray."

She pauses. With the true instinct of affection she has discovered that Madge is in love with Victor, and he with her. And to forward their cause,—a difficult matter with the Squire, as arbiter of their fortunes.

"When Lord Mowbray was here three weeks ago, or four was it? He surely said a word to you about his nephew's attachment to Madge."

"A word is not an income," says the Squire, with a slight growl. "And as for Mowbray, he barely muttered something about making Victor his heir. Nothing definite."

"Pshaw, John, what a pessimist you are. Always expecting the wrath to come. Of course, he will make that charming boy his heir. Any-one would. And no doubt—indeed, I have *heard*—that he is very dissatisfied with Paul Swindon and his little ways! At all events, it would be a pity to spoil Madge's chance of being——" she

leans forward and lays artful emphasis on her next words, "*Lady Mowbray!*"

"Cows far off have long horns," quotes the Squire, testily; but she can see that he is giving in, to a certain extent.

"You would advise then that the young people should meet?"

"Eh? What young people?" asks the Squire.

"Really, John, you seem to have no mind for anything but your pansies," says she, with much affected wrath. "Why, Madge and Victor, of course,—only now and then, however, *bien entendu*."

The Squire's mercenary mind is now bent in twain. His detestation of flirting (philandering he calls it) is fighting hard with his fear of spoiling a good marriage for one of his daughters. Victor Mowbray, if his uncle does make him his heir, is all that any man could desire; but if *not* his uncle's heir, a mere detrimental.

"She can see him," says he at last, very grumpily. "But as you say, only now and then. No engagement, mind. Barely as friends, Henrietta. You understand?"

"I understand," says Mrs. Egerton, who is capable of large margins.

"I shall be leaving here, as you know, to-morrow, and probably sha'n't be home for a week or so. I must ask you, in my absence, to be as careful of the girls, and of those they meet, as I



should be were I at home. I leave them," starchily, and with open distrust, "in your care!"

"I wonder you don't leave me the pansies, too," says she, her colour rising as well as her temper. "But I suppose *they* are too precious for such careless supervision as mine!"

"Beyond a doubt!" returns the Squire, calmly. "The very question betrays your ignorance of them. No; Daly shall look after *them*. As for Vincent——" He stops, as if thinking out something. Madge's affair has evidently dropped out of his mind, and only Vincent's happiness dwells with him. *She*—since the death of the young wife whom she so strongly resembles—has been the first thought of his life. And now—

"If you honestly think it will be for her happiness," says he, "you can let her see this young Brande."

He moves away abruptly. In his soul he does not believe that Brande will care to marry his poor, afflicted, pretty girl, but the very thought of her going—of her leaving him—makes his queer, rugged, worldly, old heart wretched.

Mrs. Egerton knows that, as he turns from her, his eyes are full of tears.

"I leave her to you," says he in a stifled tone as he marches off.

CHAPTER XIV.

"I laved my hands
By the water-side,
With willow leaves
My hands I dried."

* * * *

"Thou hast heart's delight,
I have sad heart's sorrow."

"You may remember, Tom," says Cedric Brande, breaking into a somewhat prolonged silence, "that I often entertained the idea of taking holy orders."

Tom nods his head. Then watching the pale, soft smoke from his cigar rising through the lamplight to the ceiling—they are sitting in the library of "The Elms" after dinner—goes on carelessly: "If your mind is set on that line of business, it is not too late yet to gratify your pious fancy. Go in and win." It is the day after the Squire's departure.

"Not too late, of course; but——"

"You doubt your own worthiness," says Tom, with a shrug and a light laugh. "Just like you."

"It is hardly," begins Cedric, nervously, "that!" He stops, and then—eagerly, "Though

you are right in what you say, I have doubted my own worth. I have never been proved."

"Oh! as to that," says his brother, with a touch of kindly impatience, "if *you* aren't saintly enough, the Church, to-day, must be in a poor way. I should take heart of grace if I were you, and——"

"No, I have given up the thought of the Church, now. I feel—I believe, there is other work for me to do."

"You mean?" carelessly.

"I . . . You know Vincent Grace?" He hesitates; his voice now is shy, nervous, and on his young, pale, spiritual face a faint colour is rising.

"Well, I needn't answer that question," says Tom Brande, with affected gayety. He compels his lips to a smile that he feels is forced, but all at once he knows that his face has grown livid. An icy hand seems to be clutching at his heart. *What* is he going to say?

"You know, too," says Cedric, gently, tenderly, as if thinking of some beloved and wounded thing, "how afflicted she is; how sad, how lonely her life must be. Well, I—I love her. She is very, very dear to me; and I think she likes me; and—I—hope to——"

"Go on!" says Tom, hoarsely.

"To marry her!"

There is a dead silence.

A very raging devil seems to be now tugging

at Tom's heart. He! what does *he* know of love? "She is very, very dear to me!" What a word for a lover! "How afflicted she is!" How dare *anyone* think her afflicted! She, the sweetest . . . Oh! if only he had believed it possible that she might love *him*, he—— And it is not yet too late. If she is for any man, why not for him,—the man who adores her, who understands her, whom *she* (some instinct not to be overridden tells him this) could understand,—nay, *does* understand. But to cut out his own brother! No. That is impossible. . . There is still a way out of it, however. She may refuse him!

"You think it an unwise step for me to take," says Cedric, gently, mistaking the meaning of his brother's silence. He speaks in all loyalty and purity of intention, but his words jar on the other's tortured feelings. An "unwise step" for him? Unwise! To the man who would only too gladly have taken that step and thought it the greatest wisdom of his life, they produce a maddening sense of irritation.

He crushes back, however, the wild retort that is almost on his lips. A glance at his brother—at the beautiful, emaciated face—stifles it.

"You have quite made up your mind?" asks he, presently. He feels his tone is hard, unnatural. "You have counted the cost?"

"Her misfortune, you mean? That," says Cedric, a tender smile overspreading his face,

"only makes me love her the more. That is *why* I love her, I think."

"A nineteenth century apostle." Tom bursts into strange and excessive laughter. "And she,—is she willing to be wedded on those terms?"

"Terms?"

"Well, pity. You spoke of or hinted at it. She will accept you? marry you? You are *sure* of that?"

"I think so,—I trust so," says Cedric, reverently, hopefully, calmly,—so wonderfully calmly.

The man watching him, stirs in his seat.

"I have even thought," says Cedric, dreamily, tenderly, "that, in this matter of Vincent, if I *had* gone into the Church, I could not have done more—devoted myself more——" He pauses.

"Than to *her*. Well, I hope you *will* be devoted. However, it is not orders you are going to take now," says his brother, interrupting him with a harsh attempt at mirth; "it is a wife. About as much of an order as most men are equal to. And *your* wife—so beautiful, so helpless——"

He jumps up and goes to a distant table, presumably to get another cigar. It takes him a long time to choose it.

"You will have to look after her; to consult her wishes only; to live for her," says he, in a muffled sort of way, without turning round. "Her happiness must be your one thought."

"I know that," says Cedric, kindling into a warm gladness. "That is what attracts me. Her utter helplessness. From the very first that appealed to me."

Tom stares at him.

"And her beauty?" questions he, slowly.

"Oh, that, of course. Still," dreamily, "it was not her beauty that drew me to her. Not that alone; and I am glad of it. To love, merely because of form or feature, with no thought for the beauty of the soul——"

"The man who stops to generalize is seldom honestly in love," says Tom, abruptly, coming back to his chair.

"You think I generalize. You do not understand. Love," he pauses, and casts a troubled glance at his brother; "what do you call love?"

"It is a passion!" says Tom, with a sudden rush of vehemence that startles himself.

"Oh, no!" Cedric recoils from him. His beautiful face grows mystical—saddened. "Love, as I see it, is the very heart of all religion,—pure, perfect, calm."

Tom Brande rises like a volcano and flings his cigar into the grate.

"Oh, go to——"

In a second—it only wants a glance at Cedric's face—his mad mood dies away.

"I beg your pardon," says he, with a strange laugh. "To send a man to Jericho is hardly

civil." (It had not been Jericho in the first edition, but he had been quick with his revising.) "But you take such odd views of things, and——"

Cedric hardly heeds him; his mind is still on the "idea" that is now the strongest chord of his life's music.

"You can see how it is with me. Her sweetness, her inability to cope with the world round her. You know, Tom," leaning forward with gentle confidence, "how I have always longed to succour the poor, the wretched."

"Oh, come!" frowning. "The poor, the wretched, if you will. But, surely, Vin,—*she* does not come under that head."

"Surely *she does*," says Cedric, with a nearer attempt at vehemence than he has yet shown. "What can be more deserving of care—of pity—than——"

"Than the deserving poor!" puts in Tom, sarcastically, some small devil again taking possession of him in this moment of his wrath and misery.

"I was going to say," says Cedric, with a touch of sadness, "when you interrupted me, than one deprived of sight."

"Were you? I must congratulate you, Cedric, on taking your love affair in such a splendidly philanthropic spirit. I admire you. I do, really. I couldn't do it. I hope she will admire you, too."

But that goes beyond question. Care! pity! She must appreciate those sentiments. Any woman would. Women are so fond of being pitied, don't you think?"

He breaks off short in his bitter, stupid irony, seeing Cedric's eyes fixed on him as if a little uncertain—a little mournful.

"You think——" begins the latter.

"I don't; I don't, indeed. I make quite a point of never thinking," says Tom, whose brain seems on fire. "One couldn't create a greater mistake than to do that."

"Still, you seem to think——" Cedric persists.

"Oh! if you will compel me," shrugging his shoulders. "It seems to me, the very lightest thought on my part, and hardly perhaps worth your consideration; but it *does* seem to me that you rather mistake the situation. Care and pity! Is she not surrounded with these estimable things already? What the wife *you* have chosen will want—will be *love*!"

"That, as I have told you, she has," says Cedric, a gentle blush colouring his pale face. "With all my heart I love her. Who could fail to love so gentle, so dependent a creature."

Tom Brande makes a sharp movement. "Dependent!" The same note always! Is the fellow a fool or mad? Good heavens! can't he see the *beauty* of her, as well as that black cloud that God in His strange ways has cast around her?

"It seems to me," Cedric is going on in his quiet voice, "that were she to remain unmarried until her father dies and her sisters settle themselves in life, that she, poor child, would then be left terribly alone, with no one to look after her."

Tom draws a deep breath. His mind runs to the thought that there is at all events one person who would gladly give his whole life from now to the hour of his death to look after her. He struggles with himself, and succeeds in saying calmly,—

"I can't see that."

"My dear Tom, you must see it."

"I don't, however."

"But——"

"I see this," says Tom, sharply; "what you *can't* see, evidently; that as you have" ("*condescended*" is on the tip of his tongue, but he has the grace to suppress it) "had the good taste to fall in love with her, other men might do so too."


There is a slight silence.

"I am afraid not. That is hardly likely," says Cedric, with a slight contraction of the lids, as if disliking the idea. "Poor darling girl. She——"

"She is one of the loveliest girls on earth," says Tom, controlling himself with the greatest difficulty. "And—you may not be a slave to beauty, but other men——"

"I had not thought of that." Cedric's spiritual face looks pained, and all at once Tom is sorry he had said those last words. The strange joy that Cedric had felt in the thought that he *alone* was to be the one to step forward and take this stricken girl out of her life's solitariness into his house and heart has been shaken. Tom, watching him, sees this and wonders. To Tom, to love was to be jealous,—to believe all eyes that fell on his beloved were caught and held by her; but Cedric—— It seems plain to Tom that Cedric had believed himself bent upon one of his missions,—a greater, a sweeter, a more exalted one, no doubt, than all the others, but still a mission,—when he fell in love with this beautiful blind girl, and had come, as it were, to her rescue. He had regarded her as a being afflicted of God,—as cast on one side by Him,—bereft, lonely. His strange, spiritual aspirations had first drawn him to her; and then her beauty had appealed. Even his ascetic nature had not been proof against the charms that had drawn his brother at once into the gulf: it had strengthened him in his resolve to devote his life to her.

The love, no doubt, was genuine, but it was largely mixed with the desire to help the helpless that had been born with him. All his energies, all his money, ever since he had grown to man's estate, had been given to the setting up of the



unhappy ones of the earth, to the lifting of them from their sloughs of despond. And *now*, at the very touch-point of his life, his love, fresh-born, has been tinctured with this desire,—has, indeed, grown out of it.

Tom—watching, thinking—is conscious of the greatness, the sweetness of his motives, but in his heart he scorns him.

Pity! To pity *her*!

Pity truly is *akin* to love, as the great Master has it; but it is not love itself! And to marry *her* through pity, when he, Tom, would gladly have fallen on his knees before her and *thanked* her for taking him, unworthy though he is! It seems an outrage!

“She is lovely,” says Cedric. “I know that.” His tone is still a little sad, a little depressed. “But——”

“A blind wife is not to be desired?”

“I was not going to say that. How could I? Only that any infirmity her body knows is amply supplied by the perfection of her soul. She seems to me one born to comfort others. I told you just now I once had thought of taking holy orders; but not for work *here*. I had,” he gets up suddenly, and goes to the still undarkened window and gazes out into the moonlit scene before him as though looking into worlds unknown, unconquered, by the Church, “I had thought of going as a missionary,” says he.

"A missionary!"

"Yes; to—to——" He hesitates.


"My dear boy, why go on if it distresses you? We all know it. The nigger carries the day! He is always fashionable! A black man, if he is genuinely done—if it is Nature's Nixey that has been applied to him—is one of the most interesting things alive at this moment! Do you," with a somewhat satirical glance, "propose to take your wife on a honeymoon to Timbuctoo?"

"I had thought of China," says Cedric slowly, yet eagerly. He has disregarded, perhaps not heard, his brother's careless sarcasm. It had been very careless. Tom had not believed for a moment in his own suggestion; but now he is wide awake.

"China?"

"Yes, China," says Cedric, absently. "The difficulties there are immense; the dangers great. A splendid place to tackle! And Vincent, from what I have known of her, would, I think, be willing to risk something of that. And her gentle beauty" (Tom crashes back his chair and rises to his feet), "her gracious air," goes on Cedric, his hands clasped, his eyes alight with a fire born of no earthly passion, "might no doubt be useful, might draw them to the fold. Her very affliction——"

Tom Brande loses himself altogether. He



flings the chair he is leaning on with a mad rage to the ground, where it comes to a resounding end.

"Are you a devil, or only a fool!" cries he, "to take her—*her* into such dangers as you describe! Is *that* how you love her? You would sacrifice her to your *cause*, as you call it! Her!—that slender, beautiful——"

He stops dead short,—shocked, horrified at his own emotion. What does it all mean? Too well he knows what it means.

"You take things strangely sometimes, Tom," says his brother, a little coldly, perhaps, but very gently. "When I spoke of dangers, they were not for her. She should know no dangers. I might myself have to risk things, but I should ensure her safety, believe me, quite," with a little touch of hauteur that sits most strangely on him, "*quite* as certainly as you or her father could. And, besides, if she does not wish to go,—it is a question in the air so far,—there is an end of it. All this shall be just as my poor girl wishes. My life is hers,—devoted to her from the hour of our marriage."

The words "My poor girl" grate again on Tom's mind. He shudders. He feels now as near to hating his brother as ever Cain was!

"She is hardly so 'poor' as you seem to imagine," says he, in a low but harsh tone.

"Unhappy, perhaps, I should have said. How-

ever, when one is blind, Tom, one is 'poor indeed.'"

"Not Vincent! And, anyway, why should she be blind? I have gone into it. I have asked questions. Mrs. Egerton tells me it was a fever or something that deprived her of her sight when she was only five years of age. That strikes me as leaving a margin—something to go on. You take me?"

"No," says Cedric, slowly, even reluctantly.

"I mean, then, that there is some reason for hoping that her eyes are not irretrievably closed."

"You think wrong," says Cedric, with a quick burst of something that is not so much anger as agitation. "She—a girl who for fifteen years or so has been dead to the world's light—to be now restored to it? No,—no. Impossible!"

There is such strange passion in his manner that Tom is silenced for a moment. "Cedric, the calm," as he often calls him in his thoughts, to be thus vehement! And why?—because he, Tom, would desire the return of sight to the girl his brother loves.

"But why?" asks he, at last.

"Because it would be against the workings of God," says Cedric, pale, trembling. "Would you fight with the laws above you?"

"I would have her regain her sight, if that might be," says Tom.

"But it cannot be. I tell you it is impossible,"



says Cedric, in a trembling tone. His excitement is uncontrollable, gentle as it is. "It is a visitation of God. Who shall *attempt* to conquer it?"

Tom is silent. Once again the true meaning of his brother's love for Vincent comes to him. She is dependent on him now. If she were to regain her sight (a contingent only too sadly remote), she would be beyond the pale of his sympathy,—his help. To have her to himself alone—sad, afflicted—to know that he is her sole guardian, her protector against all evils,—in this lies the love of Cedric.

"I should," says Tom, at last, "if I were *you*!"

Cedric says nothing more. He lapses into silence, and, leaning back in his chair, gives himself up to thought.

After awhile. "If you were me, you would not. And yet, if you think of it, we are strangely alike in one way. She says our voices are impossible to distinguish one from the other. And a stranger thing," he laughs softly, and leans towards his brother, "she told me only yesterday it was my voice, not me, she liked. She didn't know me, but she did know my voice. Such a quaint, odd fancy, wasn't it?" He waits for his brother's reply, but Tom has turned aside on some pretext, and Cedric cannot see how white his face has grown.

His voice,—not him! Then *whom* does she really love?

"I have thought,—I have indeed made up my mind," says Cedric, his voice breaking through his brother's terrible reverie, "of—of asking her to-morrow to——" He stops nervously.

"Asking her——?" Tom turns and looks at him.

"To marry me."



"I HAVE INDEED MADE UP MY MIND," SAYS CEDRIC.

(Page 144.)

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN

CHAPTER XV.

"The red rose cries, 'She is near, she is near ;'
The white rose weeps, 'She is late ;'
The larkspur listens, 'I hear, I hear ;'
And the lily whispers, 'I wait.' "

TO-MORROW has come, and has gone through its happy christening. Its new name "To-day" seems to sit lightly on its shoulders, and even now, "at shut of evening flowers," as its fresh youth declines, and Night comes on apace, and with it the knowledge that soon it must put off its mature glories and consent to be christened again, it still seems full of life and gaiety.

The old gardens of "The Court" are full of life, too. Young forms are fitting to and fro amongst the roses and the flowering shrubs. The Squire is still away, not to be expected home for a day or two,—at all events for a day,—and a somewhat unusual riot is making itself felt amongst the bushes and gravelled walks of this dear old place. The evening air is perfect: calm, delicious,—

"The gently air, sae lady-like,
Has on a scented gown,"

and not one rough or hurried breeze disturbs the beauty of the coming night.

"We are on our way to the raspberries," says Batty O'Grady, moving by a little group; "Janet is so beastly greedy there is no holding her back."

"I like that," says Janet, indignantly. "Why, it was *you* who suggested going. If that's all——" She draws back, or rather would have done so, but that a force superior to her own drags her onwards.

"Hypocrisy is the worst of all vices, Jane!" says Mr. O'Grady, in a loud and condemnatory tone. His voice is still loud as he compels her forward,—loud enough to drown her still indignant protests and explanations.

"Let us all go and eat raspberries," says Mrs. Egerton, hospitably. *All* means the two Brandes, Victor Mowbray, Madge, and Vincent. She had taken advantage of the Squire's absence and his grudging half permission to let the girls see something of their neighbours during the past week—to ask all these young people up to-day.

There had been somebody else she would have liked to ask, too, but though she had not minded the Squire's sneers about the Brandes and Victor, she *had* minded them about——

At this moment somebody emerges from between the trees and comes straight towards her.

"I really think you might have asked *me*,"

says Colonel Eyre, looking bigger than ever and rather more warlike.

Mrs. Egerton's face shows a slight accession of colour.

"You are always so busy," says she, "and I heard you were going to that 'at home' at the L'Estranges' to-day. We were asked; but the Squire—you know how peculiar he is."

This is a fling at the L'Estranges', who are new people and therefore abhorred of the Squire's soul. There is, besides, a very pretty girl belonging to this new clan, of whom Mrs. Egerton has heard of late that Colonel Eyre is much enamoured.

"Well, I was asked too," says he, "but I thought I should like to come here instead,—and as you once told me I was always welcome——"

"But *why* have you come?"

"To think things out."

"You do us a great honour, of course," says Mrs. Egerton, "to come *here* to think out Miss L'Estrange. She is wonderfully charming. One of the most charming people I have seen for some time."

"Is she?"

"You know she is."

"One of the most charming people *you* have ever seen."

"Oh, that! But you,—how do you take her?"

"I haven't taken her."

"Not yet." Mrs. Egerton laughs a little drily, "Come, you know what I mean; how does she strike you?"

"Well—she's frank—and pretty, and interesting," says the Colonel, slowly, thoughtfully.

Mrs. Egerton sighs.

"Ah, it is always the way with *them*," says she, a little ruefully.

"With them?"

"The young—the pretty, growing, girls. I sigh for the day when perhaps I, too, was frank, and pretty and amusing."

"Amusing? Did I say Miss L'Estrange was amusing?"

"Interesting, then. It is all the same."

"I don't think so." The Colonel takes his glass from his eye, dusts it, and puts it back again. It takes him some time to do it. An eyeglass gives one boundless opportunities for thought, and quite a pull over the silly people who don't use one. "To be both interesting and amusing is seldom given to one person," says he, at length. "And as to being frank,—frank people are, as a rule, very boring in the long run, even if they escape being rude. Now you——" He glances at her.

He stops, evidently afraid to go on. Mrs. Egerton bursts out laughing and holds up her hand.

"And I," she says, "am neither amusing, nor frank, nor interesting; is that what 'Your Politeness' would say?"

"Far from it." He catches the plump white hand and holds it. "*You* are interesting and frank and amusing—and," with decision, "everything!"

"Tut!" says Mrs. Egerton. "Don't be stupid. Let us go into the garden and see the children eating their raspberries."

"The children," as she had called them, with a modest desire to show him that she no longer posed as young, are enjoying themselves to the top of their bent.

Victor and Madge can be seen a good way off, standing between the raspberry-canes, their heads dangerously close together, doing, however, little damage to the raspberries, . . . whilst over there is Janet in mad spirits, chasing Batty from one apple-tree to another with a view to putting the raspberries she has gathered, *not* into his mouth, but down his neck.

Batty, the wily, proves too much for her. Now here, now there, he runs, and *now* he has doubled dexterously and caught her; and, holding her firmly by both elbows, proceeds to utter dark threats of compensation unless she instantly declares pax.


What form the compensation is to take is writ so largely in his eye that Janet, with a most un-

usual accession of colour on her soft cheeks and a would-be frown, gives in,—flinging the offending fruit far from her.

Pretty Janet! Such a child! and such a merry one! Filled with a gaiety that might easily degenerate into boisterousness, but that always keeps so well upon *this side*. Batty, casting a rueful glance after the berries flying into space, is conscious of two distinct regrets. One, that after all he hadn't given her the joy of putting them down his neck, and the other, that he hadn't taken the compensation whether or no.

Vincent, with Tom Brande beside her, is running her dainty fingers over the bushes, finding the fruit unerringly. At first he had been frightened for those pretty hands lest thorns should scratch them, but she had laughed lightly all such fears to scorn. "She—*she* to be caught by a thorn! Why, she could tell *him* how to avoid them! Mr. Brande did not know how clever she was," and so on.

Her whole air to-day is light and happy. She is indeed hardly the same Vincent of a month ago. That shy girl, who had shrunk back into herself at the approach of any stranger, has now blossomed into a pretty creature, a little shy, a little wondering always, with hands outspread at times, appealing in their weakness, but now giving full play to the natural joyousness that springs always from a nature truly sweet.



From being an actual recluse she has stepped (with nervous feet, 'tis true) into the broader path that lets her meet a few—a very few intimates. Just one or two people with whom her nature feels in unison. Of these, the Brandes had proved the most attractive.

Perhaps this state of things might never have come about but for the advent of Batty. He had been the match that had so unexpectedly fired the mine. Batty the inconsequent had, beyond all doubt, been the means of drawing her from her seclusion into the open air of society. Her sisters—her father—had been all to her before Batty's coming. But the very having to meet and know *him* . . . That had been an education in itself.

She had not permitted herself to know people, —Victor Mowbray excepted. From the time her early years were smitten with so sad, so sore an affliction, she had drawn back, with a curious strength in one so young and fragile, from contact with the world without,—falling back upon her sisters, her governesses, and specially upon her father (whose very soul was centred in her), for the society that every human thing requires.


Batty's advent, so strange, so unexpected, had upset all this. It had carried her out of herself. It flung a new element into her silent life, and, as an experience, was unique. Vincent, with her usual nervousness, held back from him at

first; but it was impossible to be shy with this young Irishman, who knew no shyness himself, and who, with the sensitiveness that belongs to the land of Erin, had divined at once the terrible shrinking, the sad grief, that held her aloof from her fellows. He tackled this miserable sadness and overcame it.

He did her the utmost good. He dragged her from her soul's darkness (he would have given a good deal to drag her from the other, the more material one) into a fuller view of life. He talked incessantly to her whenever she was present (neglecting even the teasing of Janet, in which his heart delighted), taking the attitude towards her of one to whom it had never occurred that she was blind. He never seemed for a moment *sorry* for her, as all the others openly were, and he was quite particular about showing her no consideration, while all the time seeing indefatigably to her wants.

And all this *took* her,—as the casual slang of the day has it. It was balm to the poor child's soul, who, perhaps, at times had suffered a good deal from the tender solicitude of those around her.

Batty she found delightful,—and if, as has been hinted, his manner gave the impression of being a little behindhand in the way of thought for her, certainly no one in the house, not even her father, was more careful of her,—



more ready to guard her steps and to watch her darkened ways.

Thus when the girls, or the Squire, or Mrs. Egerton would rush forward with a spoken word of alarm if they saw her in danger of stumbling against anything, Batty, without that warning cry, would spring forward, with a gay word or two that had nothing to do with the danger in hand, and tuck his hand beneath her arm, and, still talking (it is perfectly astonishing the amount of words he knows), guide her past the immediate danger into a safer spot, without her lovely, wide, sightless eyes knowing anything about it.

He was like a fresh strong breeze to her, that carried her out of herself and landed her on a better, a freer shore. His wonderful Irish vitality, so full, too, of a quick knowledge of the griefs and joys around him, attracted her, and drew her out of the mists of her sadness and away on the breast of its wave to that outer world she had dreaded her whole life through.

He had broken the spell that for years had held her, and sometimes as she gaily laughed with him and teased him in return for his teasing, her sisters scarcely knew her to be the old, reserved, Vincent; while the Squire, looking on, felt in his heart—though he would have died rather than admit it—thankful for the chance that had thrown Batty into his house. He was

the *more* thankful, in that with all Vincent's undoubted delight in Batty's gay humour, there was no "philandering," as he always called it, about their friendship.

* * * * *

Tom Brande watching her now carefully, in spite of all her pretty declarations of independence, becomes suddenly conscious of an approaching footstep. He looks up with the quick clutch at his heart that presages evil, and sees that it is Cedric. A glance at his brother's face, which is pale but earnest, warns him of the errand on which he has come. A choking sensation rises in Tom's throat. There is a rush of blood to his head. All at once a dogged determination to stand still here beside her and so prevent Cedric's declaration takes hold of him. Why not? But for his own madness *he*, Tom, might have been the first to ask her. Madness of love that persuaded him that she was too beautiful, too sacred, too remote for mortal love!

The thought beats upon his brain, holding him, fascinating him. And then all at once he knows it cannot be. He, his brother's confidant, to now betray him! Cedric had told him of his intention to propose. It would be the basest of all base things to try to step in between the man who had trusted him, who believed in him,—and the woman that man loved.

He will go. His honour requires so much of

him,—and—all is not over yet. She *may* refuse him.

“Someone is coming!” says Vincent, lifting her sensitive face.

“Yes,—my brother,” says Tom, in a stifled tone. He makes a faint signal to Cedric to come nearer,—to *say* another word is beyond him. He turns away as Cedric draws near, and the coming and going clash in the blind girl’s ears.

She turns helplessly to where Tom had been standing, and where now Cedric is !

“Who has gone?” asks she.

“My brother,” replies he. And, alas ! for the fatal likeness in the two voices, she thinks it is still the one who is gone to whom she is talking. Though she cannot see,—though the two voices are so alike that she cannot even *hear* any difference between them,—still, by some subtle instinct, the poor child knows that one brother is not quite the same to her as the other.

And now he has laid bare his heart to her—has entreated her; and half frightened, half glad, she has pushed her little hand into his. Even as he clasps it, a slight surprise, a little revulsion of feeling, passes over her. Is *this* the hand that had held hers back from the thorns a moment or two ago. Oh ! yes—yes, of course,—how stupid she is ! It *must* be the same; the voice is the same,—and with a little

faint sense of amusement she tells herself that she has fallen in love with a voice! And how good of the voice to fall in love with *her*! Poor child! a sense of only half-understood triumph is urging her to her marriage. She will be as other girls are who have had tender lovers. Here is some one who will care for her all her long life through,—to whom, in spite of her sad affliction, she will be the dearest upon earth.

* * * * *

It is all over; she has promised to marry him, and Cedric, with a thrill of protective joy in his heart, has pressed his lips to her forehead.

"Tom will be so glad to hear of this," says he, tenderly.

Vincent starts perceptibly. "Tom?" Who, then, has been with her all this afternoon? when she was gathering the berries who had held back her hand lest the thorns should hurt it? She feels the pressure of that hand still. Tom! she thought it had been Tom! . . .

But the voice; it is the *voice* she loves. She turns and holds out her hands to Cedric with a lovely, flushed smile.

"Tell Tom I am happy," says she.

CHAPTER XVI.

"Her hair's dark hue may not be said,
But when she lifts her brow to mine,
Earth in so deep a dusk is laid
That all the stars of love do shine."

MEANTIME, a very different love-affair is taking place somewhat lower down in the garden. Madge and Victor Mowbray having wandered in an apparently artless but distinctly artful manner behind a fine hedge of *escalonias* that would defy the eye of one's own conscience to see through it, are now seated in a proximity that leaves nothing to be desired upon the raised bank at its back.

"I may speak to you now, Madge. You know that——"

"You often spoke to me before," says Madge, with a pretence at not understanding that is quite done away with by the little swift glance she casts at him from under her long lashes. But the foolish boy doesn't see it; he frowns a little, and moving, makes a little—a *very* little distance between them.

"But not like this."

"No. No, indeed!" with meaning. She has resented the frown and movement.

"This is surely better!" eagerly, in spite of his disappointment.

"Worse!" shaking her head, and staring reproachfully at the far horizon. "*Far* worse!"

"How on earth can you say that!" with some wrath. "Now, when my uncle says I am to be his heir——"

"I don't care about your uncle." Madge lifts an unkind shoulder.

"Or about his heir either, perhaps?" very naturally offended, and moving still farther towards the end of the bank.

"Oh! as for *him*."

"Well—what have *I* done, anyway?"

"It isn't what you've *done*,"—Madge casts another adorable glance at him from under her big straw hat,—a glance full of a sweet coquetry,—"*it's what you are doing*."

"What am I doing, except trying to tell you that I love you——"

"You told me that before!" says Miss Grace, with proud indifference.

"Well!" coldly, "I have nothing more to tell you except that again." (Silence.) "*Nothing but that*," repeats he, firmly.

"I can't hear you there," says she.

"You could if you liked," says Victor, in so distant a way that the coquette gives in. She casts a little, slow, lovely glance at him all along the bank; it reaches his shoulder first, and then

his ear, and now his eyes, and all at once as their glances meet her lips break into an irresistible smile.

"Well—I *don't* like!" says she; and in another moment they are in each other's arms, and are laughing and kissing in the same breath.

"You love me; you *do* love me," says Victor, his handsome face reading hers anxiously. "I have hoped it—feared it—thought it—but now——"

"Well, now," saucily, "you *know* it, I suppose."

"Yes, I do," says he, catching her pretty impertinence from her. "And, Madge, isn't it splendid? What a good fellow he is after all! I am to be his heir—and he has told your father of it, and——"

"Well?"

"Well, your father has given a *sort* of consent, you know, because I shall not only be Lord Mowbray some time or other, but owner of the estates as well."

His tone is so entirely free of exultation of any sort over this fact that her father's mercenary dwellings on it come the more clearly—the more abominably home to her; she moves restlessly and draws herself away from him.

"I don't care to dwell on that," says she, coldly.

"Oh, Madge! When it is everything to *me*!

It has given *you* to me. And me to—— But perhaps you don't care about that. I could not possibly be as much to you as you are to me."

"Oh, you are, you are!" cries she, bursting into tears and flinging her arms round his neck. "You are wrong there. And I *do* care. I care with all my heart. And I'm glad you're somebody's heir, because now——" she sobs unrestrainedly, if happily.

"Now, darling?"

"Now we can belong to each other!"

* * * * *

Up here in the small marquee Batty is pouring out tea with all his usual grace. Ever since his arrival at "The Court" he has been allowed this privilege, Mrs. Egerton having at once felt he was distinctly worthy of it. Assisted by Janet, he wields the teapot and the cream-ewer with an air of distinction hardly to be surpassed.

Now all the cups are full, and Mr. O'Grady, with a little signal to Janet and a sigh of joy, no doubt, for the prowess he has displayed so far (not, as Janet very meanly hints afterwards, for the prowess he is *about* to display), sinks down upon a garden chair beside that caustic damsel and begins a serious flirtation with the short-bread. In this encounter it may be said at once that the short-bread comes off decidedly second-best. After which victory he directs his atten-

tion to the sandwiches, aided and abetted by Janie, who keeps him well in countenance all through,—whatever her gibes may be later on when “the feast is over and the lights are low.”

Tom Brande, standing a little apart from the rest, is trying to solve the meaning of Vincent’s absence and the strange dreamy look in Cedric’s eyes. Does her absence mean well or ill for him? Mrs. Egerton and the others are all laughing and talking together, and indeed all is going “merry as a marriage bell,” when suddenly, from the direction of the house, a shout brought forth by stentorian lungs echoes through the air.

“Henrietta! Henrietta!”

Mrs. Egerton lets her spoon fall and sits erect. The Squire must have come home a day too soon. She turns affrighted eyes on Madge, who, on her part, makes a movement that takes her several inches farther away from Victor than she had been a moment ago.

“Someone calling you, I think, Mrs. Egerton,” says Cedric Brande, who naturally is not *au fait* with the Squire’s eccentricities.

“Mr. Grace, I fancy,” says Mrs. Egerton, faintly. She makes a noble effort to smile, with a view to concealing the pangs of fear from which she is suffering, but fails ignominiously. The smile is nothing but a fixed grin, suggestive of horror. “He has come home

somewhat sooner than we expected. Madge dear——” with an appealing glance.

But Madge’s return glance is so agonized as to put an end to all hope of any help from *her*; and Mrs. Egerton, with a whirling brain, tells herself that in another minute or so the Squire will be amongst them—*on* them as it were,—and goodness only knows what he will say to these poor inoffensive young men. It is at this point that she feels a light touch on her shoulder,—and now a whisper in her ear. Both belong to Batty.

“Sit tight,” says Mr. O’Grady, briefly but beautifully; “I’ll tackle him!”

In another instant, with extraordinary dexterity he drops the front curtains of the marquee, thus hiding its inmates from the prying eyes of the world outside; *and not too soon*, for now they can hear him shouting to the Squire, who has evidently just come round the corner that commands the tent.

“You, Squire!” roars Batty, with extraordinary heartiness. “Home so soon! The girls *will* be glad. Seen ’em yet?”

“Seen them?—I can’t see anybody!” roars back the Squire, whose face is like a peony.

“Such a blessing you have come,” says Batty. “I can assure you those——” The shouts are less appalling now to the anxious listeners in the marquee as the two outside seem to be approach-

ing each other. There is terror in this thought too, however, as of course the Squire must by this be pretty close to them. Mrs. Egerton is conscious of a distinct regret that she never, amongst her other branches of education, learned to faint.

"Where the deuce is Henrietta?" demands the Squire.

"Mrs. Egerton? With the girls, I fancy. You didn't meet them on your way?"

"No. And not in the house, Mills says. They are in that stuffy thing down there, perhaps," indicating the tent with his hand. There is an awful minute in the "stuffy thing," during which Mrs. Egerton grows grey and Janie nearly gives away the whole situation by a smothered if hysterical burst of laughter.

"Oh, I've just been there," says Batty, cheerfully. "But look here, Squire, I am awfully glad you are back. I am indeed: I thought of sending you a telegram yesterday. If you only knew how they've been going on. How those——"

"Girls!" says the Squire, in the tone of a tiger preparing to spring.

Frightful tension in tent. *Is Batty going to betray them?*

"Girls! chut!" says Batty, contemptuously. "Far, far worse than that. Who cares for girls?" (Janie, inside, makes a movement, but

is promptly suppressed by Madge.) "But your pansies, Squire! I am sorry to say that——"

"Eh? What—what!" the Squire is now all alive on another tack. "And I told that infernal fool to look after them——"

"Well, I don't think he has followed out your instructions. I can't be quite *sure*, of course. I'm not much of a judge of pansies, I confess, but they seem to me to look rather—er—well—raggy, you know. Better come yourself and see 'em,—eh?"

After this the dwellers in the tent hear nothing save the sound of departing footsteps. Sweeter sounds were never heard! Batty has saved them!

And now Mrs. Egerton, with a courage worthy of a better cause, wakes from her silence, and tries once more to take up the thread of her late conversation. But Tom Brande very naturally has seen through it all, and after a decent delay makes his adieux to his hostess.

He is indeed only longing for the opportunity to get away; tortured by anxiety to know how it has gone with Cedric, he feels as if he will never be soon enough alone with his brother.

He goes forward to say good-bye to Mrs. Egerton, but Cedric reaches her side before he does, and Tom falls back. Feeling wretchedly uncertain, he watches his brother's movements—his face—and again hers, Mrs. Egerton's. Alas

for any small hope he had ever had! Mrs. Egerton's face is now one delightful smile as Cedric whispers to her,—and even the words, spoken so low as to be unheard by an ordinary listener, "I congratulate you," come home with a desperate force to Tom, who could hardly be classed as ordinary in this "*galere*."

He turns aside abruptly, and has reached the entrance-gate when Cedric overtakes him.

"Tom, what a hurry you were in!"

"Well?" asks Tom, turning slowly to him.

"It is well," says his brother.

"She has accepted you?"

"Yes. Poor darling girl! I trust and pray, Tom, I may be able to make her happy."

Tom makes a movement of his head; speech is beyond him. He turns aside to a stile on his right, and has one foot on it, when Cedric calls to him:

"Not coming my way, Tom? Not when I have so much to say to you?"

"Impossible. I *must* call at the Grants' Farm this evening. Their rent is far overdue."

"Well, get the interview over as soon as you can, and give them good terms. The poor are always to be pitied. And be in good time for dinner whatever you do. I have much to talk over with you."

Again Tom's only reply is a bare nod,—his face well turned away;—after which he springs

over the stile and plunges into the wood beyond.

* * * * *


Now, by ill luck, the Squire, in spite of all Batty's manœuvres, has returned to the front so far as to see the backs of the departing foe; to see also Mrs. Egerton, who is waving a kindly adieu to Victor and Colonel Eyre.

"Ha!" calls the Squire wildly, prancing down upon his prey, "there you are at last, Henrietta! I might have known how it would be! That I should find you in my supposed absence entertaining all the young men in the county. You ought to be ashamed of yourself! And when, too, I told you that those girls were to be kept as quiet as possible——"

Mrs. Egerton puts up her hand.

"Spare me *one* moment if you can," says she, with excessive dignity; Cedric's last words have armed her with a weapon on the strength of which she feels she can defy the foe. "This is hardly the time, John, for you to begin your incivilities; I have a matter of great importance to tell you. Vincent," with ever-growing solemnity, "has this afternoon consented to marry Cedric Brande!"

She pauses to watch the effect of her bomb-shell, which, indeed, exceeds all that she had looked for. It deals far greater confusion than she had dreamt of in her fondest dreams. The



Squire stands speechless after its delivery, his face aghast. He seems, indeed, so disturbed, so positively grief-stricken, that Mrs. Egerton begins to feel quite sorry for him.

"I wish you would not take it like this, John! Surely, considering all things, you would not grudge her a glimpse of happiness."

"Married!" says the Squire, as if trying to believe in it and failing. "The little one married. Oh, nonsense."

"It won't be altogether *losing* her," says Mrs. Egerton, gently. "He lives so very near. Quite close to us, in fact."

"Oh, hang him!" says the Squire. "And as for her living close to me,—a fig for that! Once married, she'll never be the same to me again."

He turns away, and walks with bowed head along the terrace. At the end of it he turns.

"Tell that rascal Batty that I can see through *him* now, and his anxiety about my pansies."

Mrs. Egerton takes no heed of this,—Batty is very well able to look after himself; but Vincent . . . She runs up to the girl's room, and finds her there, sitting in a lounging chair, leaning a little forward, as if gazing, with her sightless eyes, into strange places of her mind.

Mrs. Egerton slips her arms round her.

"You are happy, darling? You love him?"

"Ah! I don't know," says the girl, with a

curious laugh that is followed by a long and quivering sigh.

“You don’t know?” anxiously.

“No . . . I don’t!” She rises, as though it is no longer possible to her to stand still. “I love the *voice*——” She hesitates, and then, with a strange petulance in one so sweet, “Why, *why* are there there two voices in the world so much alike!”

CHAPTER XVII.

When first we met we did not guess
That love would prove so hard a master.

TOM BRANDE had not gone home to dinner after all. He had walked all night through the silent woods, until at last, exhausted, he had sunk upon a bed of moss, and fallen for a while into that oblivion that means the best of all things to sorrowing hearts,—forgetfulness.

When he wakes the day is just dawning,—a last remnant of night still fighting with the heralds of the day. A dewy freshness is upon the air, whilst above the faint glimmer of the dying stars can still be seen.

He gets to his feet and looks around him. Already the red grows more lusty in the sky, and

“Dawn, as a panther springs
With fierce and fire-fledged wings,
Leaps on the land that rings
From her bright feet.”

He takes in the glories of the growing morn, and then mechanically starts for his home. With the first movement of his body all comes back to him. It is at an end, then,—his hope, his fear. She is going to marry Cedric.

He walks steadily onwards through the tall bracken, now startling a hare at his feet, now listening to the morning call of the birds one to the other, whilst from below, in a kind of semitone, comes the love-note of the dove,—“coo, coo.” It is all so calm, so terribly tender, that the man, listening with his breaking heart, grows almost maddened by it. There is, too, a thought that will not be silenced. He must go to her, congratulate her. It will be expected of him. To-day he must go.

* * * * *

She is here, alone in the morning room, and as he enters, hearing his step, she looks up quickly. She had been standing, moving her fingers over a bunch of late carnations, as if feeling their colours, but now she lets them fall, and turns her head towards him expectantly.

“Ah! you have come!” says she, a little shyly, a little nervously. “I thought you would not be here until the afternoon.” She goes softly to him with little outstretched hands. There is nothing eager in her movements, however, rather something that speaks of uncertainty. She is looking very beautiful in her shyness and distress, and Tom, filled with mad love and pity for her, grows tongue-tied. He can only put out his own hands, and take those small pathetic ones, and clasp them in a close embrace.

As his hands touch hers the blind girl's face changes. It lights up with a splendid gladness, and her mouth quivers to a happy smile. All the uncertainty, the hesitation of a moment since, is gone.

"You will have to forgive me," says she, tremulously. "But," her fingers tightening around his, "I have had doubts, *many* doubts since—that hour—last evening. I have even told myself since that I *could* not . . . But now—now I *know* I love you!"

Tom is still holding her hands, pressing them convulsively in his agitation. In another moment if he *wills* it—she will be in his arms,—*his*, as instinct tells him, and his only. The beautiful mouth is uplifted to his; he makes a slight sharp movement that draws her to him.

Then something that was born with him, the strong, the splendid bias towards the right, that we call honour and that makes the gentleman, prevails. He pushes her back gently.

"Why, that is well," says he, gaily; if she could only have seen the gaiety of his *face*! "of *course* you must learn to love me, as I am to be your brother."

"*Brother!*"

She shrinks back; her face grows slowly from extreme pallor to a more extreme red. Oh, the shame on the lovely face! It goes to his heart.


"As for the doubts," says he, rattling on with an almost frantic pleasantry and quoting her own words to show her how completely he has misunderstood her real meaning, "no wonder you have had them. I'm not the real brother by any means, am I? But that comes, I *hope*, of having never had a sister until *now*." The emphasis he lays on the *now* is immense, and he draws in his breath a little quickly as he makes it.

"You are——?" says she, breaking in upon his honest attempts at indifference ruthlessly.

"Why, Tom Brande," says he, with a light laugh. What that laugh costs him is hardly to be counted, but the awful exigencies of the moment force him to it. "But"—he has now got to the height of his reckless wretchedness—"now that I think of it, as I am to be your brother for the future, I may as well be 'Tom' to you without the Brande, eh?"

"Tom—*Tom* Brande," repeats she. "But it was you who were——" she checks herself sharply, and there follows a little silence, in which she seems to be thinking, thinking. Then, with an air that she evidently believes to be quite Machiavellian, but that would not have deceived a baby, "Oh, no, of course not. It was *not* you who were with me yesterday when I was picking the raspberries?"

There is an instant's agonized questioning on her part, an instant's awful hesitation upon



his. Then all at once he knows. Vincent, blind, had not seen *his* going, or the coming of Cedric. And their voices.—Had she thought he—Tom—still was with her when she listened to Cedric's proposal? Oh! the fatal similarity of their voices! But the lie has to be told.

"No; it was not," says he.

She draws back. Her face has suddenly grown very white.

"How stupid I am!" says she, colouring faintly. "That is the worst of being blind. I thought just now that you were——" she stops. What was she going to say? ("The man I have promised to marry.") She lifts her hand to her head and presses it against her forehead as if distressed; a little trouble grows upon her face. "That you were——"

"Who?" asks Tom, with passion strongly repressed.

"Cedric," says she, gently, after a slight pause. She says it firmly, and smiles as she says it, but her smile is faint.

"Ah! well, I am not Cedric," says Tom.

There is a silence, during which she has evidently been trying to think out the two brothers, comparing them in her own mind without knowing it, and quite impossibly,—as their voices alone are known to her.

"Then you are Tom," says she. "Do you know I am puzzled sometimes. It seems,"

laughing nervously, "such treachery to your brother not to be able to distinguish him from another. But that is the sadness of the blind!" She pauses, and tears rise in her sightless eyes. "I can't know anyone *really*. Not even Cedric. But you," quietly, most sorrowfully, "can *tell* me about yourself, at all events. You can give me eyes, so far as you are concerned. I have sometimes been puzzled by you. To-day you are sad—to-morrow gay—and again the next day you laugh—and the next day after that you are silent—sad——"

"Whatever my happy days may seem to you," says he at last, speaking only because she no longer will speak, "I am at heart, believe me, the saddest man on earth."

"Oh, no, not that!" cries she, hurriedly; "not sad. I would not have you sad. And it is not true,—sometimes you seem very happy." Again she stops short, lost in a mist of thought. The two brothers—the two voices,—one with so merry a cadence, the other so sweet, so sad, yet both the same. *Are* they one and the same,—or—— Oh! for eyes to *see*. Is she confusing one brother's mood with the other? Has she blended two men into one? Oh! dear heaven! how dreadful it is to be helpless, sightless like this, when one's whole life is in the balance!

"But sometimes," she goes on, hurriedly. "It is true; you *do* seem sad. . . . Now—— But



it is not *like* you to be unhappy to-day. . . . Oh!
that I could know; that I could understand;
that I could be *sure*——”

All at once she bursts into tears.

Of what did she want to be sure?

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Therefore more sweet and strange
Has been the mystery
Of thy long love to me,
That doth not quit, nor change,
Nor tax my solemn heart,
That kisseth in a gloom,
Knowing not who thou art
That givest, nor to whom."

THOSE words, "That I could be sure!" ring through Tom Brande's head during his walk home and for many days following. It had often occurred to him that science might do something for those poor beautiful eyes of hers that had not been *born* blind. And now, sitting here this afternoon eating his cutlet, a sudden wild desire to stir—to move—to compel someone in authority to take up her case, and see if all this great modern talent, of which so much is being said, cannot be used with a splendid result on *her*, is carrying him away. "That I could be sure!" Oh, she ought to be *made* sure! The words have hammered themselves into his brain. A sense of loyalty towards Cedric, scarcely to be defined, has held him back hitherto from taking any action. For

seven long days, indeed, his mind has lain dormant, but now all petty fears and longings seem to fall from him, leaving only remembrance of her tears, her grief, her passionate longing to see—to know—— And, rising from the luncheon-table, he decides sharply on going down to “The Court” and pleading her cause in his own way with the Squire. It seems a forlorn hope, the Squire being a fortress very hard to take, but Courage is doubly strong when it has its root in Love!

As he walks down to “The Court” his thoughts can scarcely be called pleasant. He has taken knowledge of the Squire, and feels his task to be by no means an easy one. Probably he will consider him impertinent; on the other hand, however, he may take kindly to the idea. Tom’s thoughts sway to and fro as he goes, but are not at their best entirely satisfactory.

“To weave and unweave, and to weary
Of efforts that fade into air,
To know hope of all things most dreary,
To paint her of all things most fair.”

Well, Tom carries hope with him as he goes, though, to tell the truth, he doesn’t find her very “fair.” As he reaches the village he meets Cedric, and tells him of his intention; and Cedric looks back at him as if dumb and not knowing what to say. “Won’t he come

with him?" asks Tom. "No, not now: later on—he may——"

* * * * *

Having invaded the Squire's den, Tom sits down before that truculent soul and prepares for a prolonged siege. It is easy enough to state *his* views; it is not so easy to combat the Squire's. And, in fact, after an hour's hard fight the Squire is of the same opinion still as when they started. He will not *hear* of it! It is impossible, absurd. And to raise false hopes like that!

"They may not be false, however," says Tom.

"But yet they may," retorts the Squire.

"You seem determined to take the gloomy view of it, sir. Give her at least the option of refusing."

"And thus raise false hopes, as I have said."

"And that may *not* be false, as *I* have said. I am convinced if you spoke to her she would gladly, *thankfully*, consent to this operation."

"Even if she did,—how could I submit to their torturing of her."

"My dear Mr. Grace! Torture is a word almost obsolete nowadays—as you must know—when applied to surgical operations. Pain has been reduced to a minimum by modern science. They would simply put her under the influence of some anæsthetic if they found sight *might* be restored, and she would know

very little about the matter from start to finish. At least so I have been told."

"Ah! *told!*"

At this moment Mrs. Egerton, accompanied by Cedric and Batty O'Grady, appears at the open window.

"Can I have a word with you, John? Oh!" noticing the strained expressions on the faces before her, "I see you are busy. Well—another time."

"No,—*pray* don't go," says Tom, starting to his feet. He makes a faint sign to her. "We are having an argument here, Mr. Grace and I, and I believe you will be an advocate on my side. So I meanly claim your help. Cedric," glancing kindly at his brother, "will, I am afraid, be on the other side,—the more merciful side, perhaps, but yet—I doubt it. Anyhow, everything turns, of course, on the eventual success or failure."

Mrs. Egerton laughs and shakes her head.

"I'm sorry," says she, "but it sounds like a problem. And I'm not good at that sort of thing."

Tom smiles involuntarily, and then in a few words—the Squire sitting doggedly silent and refusing to speak—explains to her his mission.

"You, Cedric; I have sometimes hinted to you of my belief," says he, turning from her to his brother.


"Yes," returns Cedric, his eyes on the ground.

He is feeling unnerved, uncertain. If this thing should be accomplished, where would the life's work he has allotted to himself be then? She would be no longer blind, sad, afflicted.

"I shouldn't have dreamed of taking the liberty of speaking to Mr. Grace about it," Tom is explaining hurriedly to Mrs. Egerton, —full of the knowledge that he has indeed taken a step that might well be resented by many,—“but that I know Vincent now—in a way—*belongs to me.*” He stops short here, and a great light grows in his eyes for a moment, then pales. Mrs. Egerton has seen it, however, and her heart sinks. “What I mean is,” goes on Tom, now a little white, but smiling, “that soon she will be my sister, and—I would have my sister see me.”

Batty, who has not come in, although he had certainly not been sent away, and who is leaning against the ivy that covers the walls of the window, feels a passing fear that should Tom's sister, as he calls her, ever see him, there is very likely to be a conflagration in his particular sky. But Batty is a wise youth and chews the cud of thought, together with the end of an ivy stem, in silence, and very greatly to the detriment of his digestion. But one must incur great dangers in great hours.

“You mean——?” asks Mrs. Egerton, nervously, who, too, is troubled by Tom's desire.



"I mean that I think she ought to see a specialist on sight as soon as possible. Great heavens!" breaking out suddenly, on catching a glance of his brother's face that strikes him as cold, unwilling, "can't you all know what it would mean to *her*? To see—to see——"

"Oh, yes, yes," says Mrs. Egerton, hurriedly.

"You are all on the same tack," says the Squire, testily. "All, that is, except Cedric. You?" he looks enquiringly at the young man.

"If one could be sure. But *how* to be sure," replies he, in a muffled tone.

"Ay! That is it. To give her a chance of *thinking* that she may be as others are,—to instil in her mind the belief that she may see,—only to have that belief destroyed in the end! It is cruel, *horrible!*" cries the Squire, vehemently. "Henrietta, I wonder you give countenance to it. Anyhow, I shall *not*. Surely her father and her future husband are the two best fitted to judge—to arrange for her happiness."

Mrs. Egerton turns quickly to Cedric. "I can't understand you," says she. "You, of all others, should be the most eager for her to see."

"If such a thing could be," says he, slowly. "But—the will—the decision of God,—is that to be lightly thought of?" His beautiful face is earnest, anxious. Yet there is fear and indecision in it. He hardly knows himself the meaning of his thoughts. *Is* it the will of

God he dreads, or the knowledge that if light comes to the girl's eyes she will be no longer a thing to care for, to lavish his life upon?

"It is the will of God," says Mrs. Egerton, "that all His creatures should be happy."

There is a little silence. Then the Squire, rising, looks round him in a worried sort of way. His eyes light on Batty, who is still leaning against the ivy and still pondering.

The Squire turns to him as a last resource.

"You, Batty," says he. "You have heard all. What do you think?"

"I think you ought to *ask her*," says Batty, promptly.

"Oh, the deuce! Never, *never*!" says the Squire.

"Excellent advice, I think," says Mrs. Egerton, in a low tone.

"Well, well, well!" The Squire's face has grown a little gray. "If you will have it, then. . . . But the child herself—— Well, there. Tell her if you will. She will refuse, and there will be an end of it."

Mrs. Egerton beckons Batty to go. He has fulfilled his mission. As for the others, they must remain. Her father, her husband who is to be, and his brother. To dismiss the brother would have been almost impossible, and yet, if only he would go.

* * * * *



And now Vincent is here,—has had it all explained to her, and is standing pale, trembling, utterly unnerved. Suddenly she puts out her hand in the terribly vague way of the blind, as if searching for something.

“Cedric!” cries she, softly, piercingly, “tell me . . . *tell* me what I shall do!”

“How can I?” His tone is almost tragic. All his life seems to be contracted into this one moment. From the first day on which he saw Vincent the idea of a mission had dawned upon him; and he had always longed for a mission, a responsibility, something to which he might dedicate himself. And with a growing tenderness for the girl had grown, too, the desire to protect, to shelter her. *Her*, a creature afflicted by God. But now! If God should in His mercy give her back her sight, where would be, then, the ground for his devotion?

“Oh, you can! Tell me what you think,” cries she, in a little frightened way that goes to Tom’s heart.

“Give me time,” says Cedric, in an anguished voice. “I don’t know what I think.”

“Ah! try, *try* to tell me!” cries she, with a little sob in her throat. “If it should be. But . . . If it should end in nothing.”

“Oh, Vincent, *chance* it!” cries Tom, suddenly, uncontrollably.

The girl looks up eagerly.

"Ah! There! Now you see you *do* know!" cries she. "Cedric, come to me."

"It was not Cedric," says Mrs. Egerton, quickly. "It was Tom who said that."

"Tom!" Vincent's face shows a sharp disappointment. She turns aside; Mrs. Egerton goes quickly to her and takes her in her arms. Two tears, stealing from those beautiful blind eyes, run slowly down the poor child's cheeks. Cedric, eager, pale with uncertainty, is leaning forward. Will she refuse?

The Squire breaks the silence.

"I told you, I told you," says he, fiercely, glaring round him with a view to hiding the fact that his own eyes are by no means dry, "that she would not hear of it. And you are right, my poor, *poor* little girl; you——"

"No, no!" exclaims she, eagerly, interrupting him with a sort of soft vehemence. "I *will* chance it! In all these years I have never, *never* forgotten the lovely light. Let me—let me——" she crushes her hands against her eyes. A faint little whisper comes from her. "Oh, dear, *dear* God, let me see again!"

* * * * *

"This is all your doing, Henrietta,—every bit of it," says the Squire, furiously, an hour later.

"Well, if so, I am not ashamed of it, my dear John. If there is a chance of her recovering her sight, would you be the one to say no to it?"

She is looking at the Squire with a challenge in her eyes, and he is looking back at her with extreme irritation in his. Answer, however, he makes none.

"You think, I suppose, that there is no hope?"

"Exactly so," snaps the Squire.

"Well, *I* don't, and William Eyre thinks with me."

"Oh, that idiot! I don't care what he thinks."

Mrs. Egerton rises with dignity.

"Would you like to know what *I* think?"

"Not particularly," says the Squire, with great presence of mind. Curiosity conquers him, however, a moment later. "Well, what?" demands he, truculently.

"That you are abominably rude!"

"Just because I said Eyre was an idiot? Well, *isn't* he? Coming here every day almost to see Madge, who doesn't care a fig about him. I hate a fool!"

Mrs. Egerton regards him long and meaningly.

"*So do I!*" says she at last, sweeping majestically out of the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

“Talking much is a sign of vanity.”

It was decided in conclave later on that the operation should not take place until September. Vincent had been taken up to town to Sir Ebenezer Browne, and that great man had given it as his opinion that—yes—there *might* be a chance! A very remote one, but still a chance! The interview had shaken Vincent terribly, and, indeed, ever since she had been restless, difficult,—her spirits very unequal. And now that the time draws near,—now that golden September is nearly with us, “Alle in yellowe clad,”—the month that is to leave her sightless for ever, or restore her to that most blessed thing on earth called light,—her nature sways to and fro, now giving her quick, wild outbursts of hope, to be met to-morrow by still fiercer pangs of grief and depression,—hours spent in deepest gloom.

To meet these, to struggle with and overcome them, has been the anxious task of those around her; and when, on Thursday last, an invitation to a picnic came from Mrs. Deane-Burnes, a near neighbour of theirs when she is at home,—which

is seldom,—Mrs. Egerton gladly made up her mind to accept it, and—which required more thought—decided on making up the Squire's mind to accept it also.

Mrs. Deane-Burnes is a woman—large, rich, worldly—abhorred by the Squire. She is certainly a rather impossible person, who gives much of her time to London with a view to marrying her girls, running down to her home, in this little sequestered part of the world, at odd moments. *One* odd moment has driven her here now,—the melancholy failure of an attempt to marry her eldest girl to a millionaire who had a big nose and something to do “in the city.”

Mrs. Egerton had approached the Squire on the subject with some fear, but of late he has seemed to take on the character of the chameleon. Ever since that visit to the specialist, indeed, he has been so kind and lenient that his own people have begun to fear for his health! The fact is that anything that will please Vincent is at this moment good to him. Her little sad outbreak of fear and grief had gone to his tough old heart, subduing him, holding him back, so that a blessed immunity from his usual searchings and prying about the household had been the result. Madge and Mrs. Egerton have joined palms about this. Poor darling Vincent! but still such a blessing, you know!

Even on the subject of Mrs. Deane-Burnes's

picnic, he has proved himself, if not exactly, amenable, at all events open to reason.

"So they wanted to go to this idiotic affair? Did Vincent want to go? Yes! Well, well. They must go, of course; though what they can have in common with that painted, silly, society fool——"

Even Janet, who had never been to a *quite* large, grown-up affair of this kind before, has been nobly permitted to be one of the party. Extreme pressure on the part of Batty, who is now quite a favourite of the Squire's, had led to this.

"She *ought* to go," said Batty. "She's growing quite countrified! Her manners, have you noticed them?" The Squire paused. "They require a great deal," said Batty, with much solemnity.

The Squire was not so much struck by Janet's delinquencies as by Batty's observations on them, and, seeing no dangers ahead, had given Janet permission to join the party. Batty, having gained his point, did not deem it necessary to tell Janet *how* he had gained it. He was wise there! One always avoids fire-works, if possible!

* * * * *

The place appointed for the picnic is about five miles from "The Court," on the top of the high cliffs that overlook the ocean. Vincent had been looking forward with a sort of wild delight to



going there; the grand, sweet, odorous winds of the ocean being very dear to her.

Now, as the people from "The Court" climb up the side hill that leads to the table-land above, from which a splendid view of the sea lies clear to them for miles and miles and miles, they find themselves in the midst of a small but happy crowd, out of which their hostess, Mrs. Deane-Burnes, emerges.

"So lovely of you to come!" cries she, in her high society tone,—a tone now accentuated. "Dear Mrs. Egerton, so good of you!"

"Well, we said we'd come," says Mrs. Egerton, smiling gently.

"I know, I know; but that is nothing, is it? Now, *is* it? Not *really*, you know. No one's word is as good as one's bond nowadays. And who is this charming child?"

She has shaken hands with Madge and Vincent and Victor Mowbray, who has come with them,—with effusion, indeed, with the latter,—and is now looking at Janet.

"My third niece," says Mrs. Egerton, a little coldly. She is a gentle, simple woman, but well-born, and to have her nieces "trotted out," as she is sure Mrs. Deane-Burnes would put it, throws her back upon herself.

"Ah! she would create a sensation in town," says Mrs. Deane-Burnes, who means to be intensely agreeable.

Mrs. Egerton looks anxiously round her, hardly knowing how to reply. As she looks she catches Batty's eye.

"I haven't a doubt of it," says that youth, beaming upon Mrs. Deane-Burnes. "The sensation she creates from hour to hour, even here, would prepare one for anything. And they are all her own; she is distinctly original. As a fact, we seldom know 'where we are' when she is on the scene. Only last week she set fire to the hay-shed, and very nearly to me, and——"

"Batty!" cries Janet, indignantly.

"Well, didn't you?"

"Even if I *did*——" indignantly; "and now I wish I *had*—— But I didn't!—and——"

"Jane!" says Mr. O'Grady, with stern reproach; "are you prepared to swear to that?"

"I'm prepared to swear to this, anyway," says that wrathful maiden, who is the more wrathful in that she has to abuse him under her breath; "that you are hateful—perfectly hateful!"

After which there is neither peace nor honour; but the belligerents being providentially separated by the passing to and fro of the small crowd around them, bloodshed is avoided. Batty is left by this happy surging of the guests close to his hostess.

"How *clean* the dear country is!" Mrs. Deane-Burnes is saying, glancing delicately through her *pince-nez* at the beautiful fields far away upon the

hills. "How calm! How 'gushingly' devoid of soil of any sort."

"You're mistaken," says Batty; "there's a good deal of soil about the country, as a rule."

"Oh, no, I think not,—I *hope* not," says Mrs. Deane-Burnes, deprecatingly. "All must be good here in this sweet spot."

"Well, there are good and bad specimens everywhere, you know," says Batty, who is beginning to enjoy himself.

"Oh, yes—yes, indeed!" says Mrs. Deane-Burnes, who belongs to several philanthropic societies in town. "But not here—not any bad *here*, I'm sure!"

"The very *worst*," says Mr. O'Grady, in a deep tone. He bends towards her, and mutters low, "*In parts!*"

"Dear Mr. O'Grady. This is very sad, very sad, indeed," says Mrs. Deane-Burnes, beginning to look anxious; "I hope I don't know 'the parts.'"

"You do, indeed, I regret to say," says Batty, who has been learning farming from the Squire, and who has been over most of the town lands round him. "Some are on your own lands."

"You are wrong," says Mrs. Deane-Burnes, with now real agitation, having rather prided herself up to this on her tenantry and their morals; "entirely wrong."

"Ah! you haven't gone into it."

"I assure you I have."

"Not many inches, I think."

"Inches?"

"Of soil."

"Good heavens! what a way of treating it! Do you mean to say that—that—— Mr. O'Grady, what *do* you mean?" cries she, suddenly. "What are you talking about? I believe my people to be the best in the world."

"Your people!" Batty grows all at once motionless, as if electrified. "My dear Mrs. Deane-Burnes, what *do you* mean? What are *you* talking about——"

"Why, my people, of course; and you?"

"Of your acres!"

Tableau.

"He's such a curious boy," Mrs. Deane-Burnes is saying presently to Mrs. Egerton. "And so comic. I suppose his being Irish, you know, eh?" She smiles at Batty, who, unable to keep away, has returned to Janet's side, but is yet close enough to hear. "He seems very *épris* with your youngest niece, eh? She reminds me, do you know, of my eldest girl——" (The eldest girl is very nearly thirty.) "Have you seen her? The Prince was much struck with her the other day at a bazaar given by the dear Duchess."

In some way this speech seems to incense Batty. Was it the comparing of Janet to Miss

Deane-Burnes? He is evidently on the point of making some extraordinary rejoinder, when Janet, forgetting her late anger, touches his arm and then lays a finger on her lip.

"Batty, don't be stupid!" says she.

"Oh! it isn't *I* who am stupid. Did you hear what she said about you and her girl? *Girl*, indeed! Well, come on, Janie. Let's give up the society of our betters and make a day of it. I'll tell you what we'll do, we'll mingle duty with our joys. We'll pluck some of those dear, quaint, rare, little sea-pansies that I see growing over there in the sandy soil, and give them to your father on our return, to add to his priceless collection. He is fond of pansies, isn't he?"

"Batty! I sha'n't allow you to make fun of papa," says Janet, with immense dignity,—she has hardly yet recovered from her late wrath. In spite of that, however, she wanders off with him along the high cliff that overhangs the "eternal sea" until the moment may arrive when luncheon will be ready.

* * * * *

It goes off very well. So perfect are the arrangements, indeed, that but few of the usual faults occur. This prevents a good deal of the laughter that, as a rule, accompanies these *al fresco* entertainments. "Beastly dull!" says Batty, with a shrug of his shoulders, to Victor, who is near him; but Mowbray is too taken up

with Madge and his anxiety as to whether the lobster salad he has just given her is up to the mark, to be quite an attentive listener. Lobsters are a little out of season. It is *almost* September.

"It is very nice. It is delicious," says she, patting the rug beneath her with a pretty invitation in her air. "You have some yourself, so you may as well eat it with me. And we have scarcely had a word up to this."

"And now I have no good word," says he. "Poor old Mason, my uncle's butler, you know, is down with a sort of fever. I can't think what it is, but Dr. Browne speaks of typhoid. I am afraid the drainage is not so good as it might be. He, Browne, you know, has written to my uncle about it, and I expect he'll send some inspector or other. In the meantime poor Mason suffers; and I can't help thinking that Matt has been looking very down of late."

"Ah, your *protégé*! I always feel, do you know, Victor, as if I should so like him. His story was so very romantic; and he always gives me such a pretty bow when I meet him, as if he knew that you—and I——" She gives *him* a very pretty *glance*, at all events, and a charming smile, and makes no protest when he lays his hand on hers beneath the rug and presses it fondly. "How is he going on?" asks she.

"Splendidly. I am really proud of him. As a rule, *protégé* is another word for snake,—the

snake in one's bosom that we have all heard of, —but Matt is the great exception. He is looking ill, though, as I tell you. And this fever of Mason's——”

“Oh, it may not be that.”

“Of course not,” hastily; “and what a horrid topic on such a glorious day as this. Come,” taking her hand, “come with me and let us look at the sea together from that big rock over there.”

Madge rises.

The rock is in a very secluded spot.

CHAPTER XX.

"What see you there
That hath so cowarded and chased your blood
Out of appearance?"

THE light is waning. The first vague touches of evening are hanging on the skirts of day. Hovering above the dying sunset that now is fiercely crimson are dark banks of clouds, sullen and steel grey. There is no sound upon the air save the soft wash-wash of the waves far down below against the accustomed rocks. It is

"An eve intensely beautiful; an eve
Calm as the slumber of a lovely girl
Dreaming of hope."

Tea is over. Batty, having impounded most of the plum-cake, nobly assisted by Janet, is now on his hands and knees beside one of the daughters of the Deane-Burnes's house, making a handsome pretence at packing up. Everyone, indeed, seems occupied in this absorbing business, wrapping up plates and dishes in paper with immense care, which the servants, receiving with a respectfully scornful air, take aside and, having removed the paper, pack them again.

Tom Brande, coming back from the cosy nook amongst the rocks where he had sat out the last half-hour alone with his cigar, looks round instinctively for Vincent. With Cedric, no doubt! Another glance round, however, shows him Cedric helping the third Miss Deane-Burnes to do something or other, having been carefully annexed by his hostess for this duty,—she, to do her justice, not being aware of his engagement to Vincent. Again Tom glances amongst the groups; but no, there is no Vincent to be seen anywhere. With a dull kind of feeling that is scarcely fear as yet, but is akin to it, he goes straight to Mrs. Egerton.

“Where is Vincent?” asks he.

“With Cedric, I expect.”

“No; he is over there.”

Something in his face, that amounts now to almost uncontrollable anxiety, would have betrayed his secret to Mrs. Egerton, if she had not guessed it before.

“She was here almost a moment ago,” says she, rising to her feet and gazing nervously around her. “She is with Batty, perhaps, or Madge or Janet. Oh, no!” with a sharp catching of her breath, “I see them all over there!” Her face grows paler. “Oh, Tom!”

“Don’t be frightened,” says he, though his own face has grown very white; “she has probably gone round there,” pointing to an

abrupt turn to their left that leads round a huge mass of rock to a huge, bare, sandy plateau.

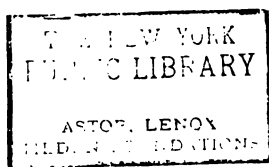
He leaves her, and having reached that big projection of rock disappears behind it. He had gone from her in a leisurely fashion, so as to subdue her fears; but his own fears have grown to such gross proportions that it is all he can do to keep from running. Once round the corner he tells himself he *can* run, but, now that he *is* round it, he stands still.

Far off, a good two hundred yards away, he can see Vincent, moving briskly, lightly, with a little silver-mounted walking-stick in her hand. In some strange way all the others had forgotten her, and the blind girl, grown suddenly happy and courageous, perhaps because of the exhilarating fragrance of the salt sea air that she has always loved, and that has been filling her mouth and senses all this afternoon, had risen a few minutes ago, and, feeling her trusty little stick in her hand, had moved forward step by step, first slowly, cautiously, then, as she lifted her delicate head and drew in the sweet, keen air, with quicker footsteps, swifter—ever swifter—until now——

Now she is going straight towards the edge of the cliff over there, that breaks sheer down to the sea,—lying fully three hundred feet beneath it!



VINCENT HAD MOVED FORWARD STEP BY STEP. (Page 198)



For one awful moment Brande's heart seems to stand still. A cold moisture breaks out on his forehead. Then he clenches his fists, digs his elbows into his sides, and begins to run. To *run!* to fly, rather! He had made a good name for himself when at Oxford in the running line, beating most of the men of his last year there, but never, even then, has he run as he is running now. Time! will there be time? Time to prevent the hurling over that hideous cliff of that slender figure!

He puts out all his speed, and then suddenly stops, conscious of a sense of astonishment at his own stupidity. She may be eternally blind, but *not deaf*, thank God! and the voice carries farther and swifter than the feet.

"Vincent! Vincent!" he shouts loudly. The wild sea-wind that has of late arisen carries his voice to her uncertainly, but through the turmoil of it she hears him. Is it the love in her heart that makes her hear him? or the love in *his* voice that now madly, if unconsciously, carries itself to her even over this angry wind? "It is Cedric!" she tells herself. But if it *had* been Cedric, would she have heard?

However it is, she stops, wavers a moment, and then turns. She has evidently grown a little nervous, and stands still, as if listening. Then again she moves, returning now on the way she has come, as she *believes*, but in reality

making for a danger even greater than that from which she has but just now moved aside.

In the round of the cliff of this coast many crevices can be seen, dragging inland here and there, and sometimes for many yards. Towards one of these she is now walking, fully believing she is retracing her steps on the path she had already trodden. How she had ever got round that ghastly chasm on her way over this sea-blown plain can never be known, for she herself cannot tell the tale; but that she is now at this moment approaching it on her return, and will shortly walk *into* it, is plain. Tom, with an accession of agony that nearly chokes him, knows that his cry to her has brought her only nearer to destruction than she had been when first he saw her on this dangerous coast. A very madness of despair seizes on him.

"Stand still! *Wait!*" he calls to her frantically, though with panting breath; but the sharp sea-wind and the roar of the surf beneath drown his voice. She is so near to *them*, and he is so far from *her*.

And slowly, slowly she draws closer to ~~that~~ yawning chasm. Her walk has grown even quicker, as if she is eager to meet something, someone! Brande instinctively knows that it is *he* whom she wants to meet. His voice had called her. Yet it will be *Death* whose arms will open to her, not his! And what a death!

"Oh, God, have mercy!" The prayer rises to his parched lips. . . . And now—*now*, at last, he has rounded that horrible chasm, and is gaining on her, and now he would have cried again some words to her to stop, but his dry lips refuse to utter them.

Step by step she draws nearer to her doom. Now but a yard lies between her and the bare edge. . . .

Blood seems to rise before Tom Brande's eyes, but still he runs,—panting, half mad.

And now she is on the very brink. Another moment and she will be over; but in that other moment he has flung himself upon the ground, has caught the floating fringes of her skirts and dragged her by main force backwards on to the bare, sandy, but sure foundation behind her.

It was a last expedient! Had he rushed forward and caught her whilst both were in an upright position, so *close* was she to the brink of the precipice, that in all probability *both* would have swayed over it.

* * * * *

She has struggled to her knees, but now Tom catches her and lifts her to her feet. The frenzy of horror, of despair, and, alas! of love, is still on him, and, with a suppressed sob, he strains her to his breast.

"Oh, what is it?" cries she, nervously, with a gasp and a little broken laugh. "Why did

you?—where was I going? *Tell* me what it is !”

She had not understood the danger,—even now she knows nothing of it; but that something is wrong has penetrated to her heart’s core, otherwise Cedric would not have been so rough to her. She clings to him in a little frightened fashion that makes poor Tom’s heart beat with a wild misery that had a touch of ecstasy in it that is as bitter as it is sweet.

“Nothing. Nothing *now* !” whispers he, hoarsely, still holding her to him. He is trembling in every limb; that picture of her, falling over that cliff and *crashing* to the rocks below, is still before his eyes.

“There *was* something,” says she, a little reproachfully. “I know that because you are frightened. Your heart is beating; and—and your voice, there is a different ring in it !”

It is the ring of passion, but the poor child does not know that. How should she, who had never heard it before. Cedric’s calm, tender, protective affection had had little to do with the deeper, the stronger moods with which Nature endows her children.

He does not answer her.

“Was I—” asks she, faintly, raising herself from his embrace, “was I going to fall—to fall over——” Her lips tremble; her beautiful sightless eyes, uplifted to his, seem in some sad, mys-

tical way to be searching his. They seem to compel the truth, to drag it out of him.

"Yes." His answer is low and reluctant.

"And you saw, and came to me? A long way off I heard your voice at first. Was I very near——" She shivers, and draws in her breath in a quick, hurried way.

"Why think of it?"

"I must think of it. I like to think of it,—and that you came to me, and pulled me back just when death *had* me——" She grows very white, then a little smile creeps over her pale, beautiful face. "Ah! what a protector I have," says she.

So sweetly, so softly, she says it. And then suddenly she lifts her arm and slips it round his neck, and draws his head down to hers, and presses his cheek tenderly against her own.

"I love you," says she.

It was a madness born of the hour, no doubt, but not until this moment has it ever occurred to Tom Brande that she does not know him. He had been thinking of her all through,—her only; of her danger, her closeness to death, over which his very soul had shuddered, and her narrow escape. The idea that she believed him anyone but *Tom* Brande, her friend, her brother, had not so much as crossed his mind.

And now she is holding his head close clasped against her own. . . . And now she has pressed

him from her a little, a very little way, and the gentle, perfect, pathetic face is looking into his; and, almost, it seems as if those large, clear eyes can *see*! She is holding up her face as if expecting his kiss!

Everything seems to float away from him,—the world, life, his very honour. The pressure of that darling arm around his neck seems to drag him down, and down, and down! Lower—ever lower—to Hell, as the betrayer of his Love (for what does *she* know) and as the betrayer of his brother, too. He is conscious of a wild desire to defy all laws of honour—all laws of every kind. Hell looms in the distance for him; still, Heaven is *here*. He stoops—

Then all at once Cedric's face seems to come between him and her, and, drawing himself up roughly, he pulls her arm from round his neck and holds her back from him.

"Why—don't you know me?" cries he, with a rude, forced laugh that seems torn from his very heart-strings. "I am *Tom* Brande. Tom, I tell you—*not* Cedric!"

There is a sudden silence. All about them the coming storm seems to grow in violence. The sea is beating itself madly against the rocks, and the wind, rushing along the sandy floors on which they stand, raises them into great sheets of dust.

He had almost flung her arm from him, but

now he catches it again, seeing the winds are swaying her, and that her face is as white as death itself.

"Tom!" repeats she, as if remembering, and then: "You are Tom!" She grows very silent. "A strange mistake," she breaks out presently; "but your voices; and——" quickly, eagerly, as one might who is bent on setting herself right, "I said just now that your voice was *different* when you called to me. You remember? You," almost passionately, "*do* remember?"

"I remember."

"Ah, it is all so confusing," says she, with a sigh that seems to burst from her. Heaven alone knows the thoughts that were in her heart. Then, again, in surely the saddest tone that ever yet was heard, "I wish—I *wish* I were not blind."

"I wish to God you were not," says Tom, with a sharp burst of rage against fate.

"Perhaps—I shall not *always* be so," says she, in a low tone.

"Perhaps not!" Though the tone is low, so much hope can be heard in it that he says quickly, "Do not dwell too much on that thought."

"Ah! I *live* on it."

"You have lived for many years without it."

"That was not life. *Now* I want to see Cedric—and—you."

"Me!" says he, in a stifled tone; "what am I to you?"

"You are Cedric's brother. And, besides, have you not saved me to-day from——" she catches her breath and in a little frightened way holds out her hands to him, "from *death*!"

"Tut, that's nothing," says he, bravely, glad and full of courage in that she cannot see the pallor of his face as her dear fingers slip into his once more. "As Cedric's *brother* I may count, indeed! I always tell him that, if he only will, he can get me into heaven in his train by lending me a few of his virtues. He has so many of his own that he cannot possibly want them all; and I have so few, that——"

"Ah, not so few!" interrupts she, sweetly.

CHAPTER XXI.

“What is death but a ceasing to be what we were before? We are kindled and put out, we die daily; nature that begot us expels us, and a better and a safer place is provided for us.”

It is a fortnight later, and the fever that had broken out at Braystown has grown to large proportions, and now is indeed raging. Poor Mason, the butler, has succumbed to it, dying with a rather alarming suddenness. He had fallen one evening, after a wonderfully lucid interval, into a state of unconsciousness, out of which he never again woke. And now Matt, the “young Master’s” *protégé*, is down with it.

The fever is indeed spreading, and quite a panic has taken hold of the Mowbray servants. They go about talking in groups and whispering amongst themselves, whilst Victor, with a queer pain at his heart, moves here and there, speaking hopeful words, though feeling no hope himself, as, with the doctor, he bends over Matt’s bed. The lad, indeed, seems dying.

“Typhoid, beyond doubt,” says the doctor, raising himself. “Drains bad, I should say. Your uncle should be told.”

“I have written to him. I wrote a week ago, but he has not answered.”

“Where is Lord Mowbray now?”

"In Italy."

"His agent, then, should be communicated with; or," thoughtfully, "why not write to his lawyer, Stamer?"

"I could do that; but I am expecting a letter from my uncle every day. I am surprised he has not answered me, as he is always most careful about his tenants, his estates, his people generally. This attack of typhoid would upset him greatly. I am more distressed than I can say, that I have not heard from him about it."

It had, indeed, seemed strange to him, this getting no answer to his letter, which had been urgent, considering all that Mowbray had said to him on his last visit. That had amounted, indeed, to making him his heir. Yet his uncle had not written to him personally one word as to the well-being of the people of his household, though he must have received word of this fever.

"It seems strange," says the doctor; "but, as you say, you may hear from him by any post. When did you say you wrote?"

"Quite a week ago. He has had, as you see, plenty of time to answer me. But he moves about a good deal, and, perhaps, he had gone somewhere else before I wrote my letter."

"No doubt," says the doctor.

* * * * *

And, indeed, Victor had been right in his conclusions. Mowbray *had* gone somewhere else.

He had passed into that land from which no return is possible.

* * * * *

The news came next morning! And a week later came still further news to the effect that Lord Mowbray had left every penny unentailed to Paul Swindon. This meant that Victor, in spite of all his uncle had said to him and to others,—the Squire amongst them,—was practically disinherited. He was the possessor of a title, and very little more. A barren title to all intents and purposes. It seemed almost impossible to believe at first; but time proved it only too true. A line from Victor to Mr. Stamer brought that eminent solicitor down to Braystown a week after the funeral, (the will having been read in London,) but he had nothing of good import to say. “No, he had heard of no other will. He was abroad when the late Lord Mowbray was last here, and had had no communication from him since. *The* will, the one leaving all to Paul Swindon, was in his hands. He had written, explaining — *ahem!* — certain things to Lord Mowbray a month or two ago — before his lordship’s death — but his lordship had taken no notice of it, and — *ahem!* — perhaps things were not altogether so black as——”

Mr. Stamer, good man and true as he undoubtedly is, was, nevertheless, incapable of forgetting that Swindon, however great a scoundrel,

would in all probability be a client of his, and, therefore, the less said about him the better.

"It seems strange!" said Victor, slowly; "my uncle was hardly the man to *say* a thing and not mean it."

"I agree with you there; but, my dear Lord Mowbray——"

Victor started as if stung.

"Oh, not that!" says he, quickly. "What a mockery! *Lord Mowbray*, with three hundred a year!"

"It does seem hard," says Mr. Stamer, with honest sympathy. "Still, what I was going to say was, that whatever your uncle intended doing, I am convinced he died without making a later will. He was always, you know," very gently and with a lowering of his voice, "a little irregular, a little dilatory, even a little vacillating where business matters were concerned. It is a trial—a great one," says Mr. Stamer, rising and laying his hand very kindly on the young man's shoulder; "but you are only at the beginning of your life, and——"

"Yes, I know." Victor rises and faces him, his handsome eyes gleaming. "It is a little shock, but it sha'n't overcome me. I have already made up my mind. I shall drop the title."

"My *dear* Lord Mowbray!"

"I mean it. Would I make a laughing-stock of the good old name? I shall drop the title

and go abroad, and," throwing up his head and smiling bravely, "conquer fortune."

"Fortune is a woman," says Mr. Stamer, admiration growing in him as he looks at the charming, undaunted face before him; "but something tells me she will not be fickle to *you*!"

Victor laughs rather dismally.

"She's proved herself something of a jade so far," says he. And then: "Where is Swindon?"

"San Francisco, I think. I cabled to him when I heard."

* * * * *

The fatal tidings, of course, had spread very fast. The county, indeed, was ringing with it. The Squire had come over hot foot to Braystown, and had been, for him, wonderfully friendly, but wonderfully *careful*, too. Victor had noticed the carefulness through the veneer, and had not been altogether surprised, though certainly cut to the very heart, when a letter from Mr. Grace reached him the evening after the latter's visit. It was suavity itself. It was lengthy—almost apologetic—*very* sympathetic, and extremely plausible. It was, indeed, everything it ought to be, but only one sentence out of the whole of it clung to Victor's memory. "Under the circumstances, you can see that the continuance of your engagement to my daughter is out of the question."

Victor wrote back. It was the letter of a despairing man, but still he kept himself well within

bounds. Restraint characterized it. He was glad of that afterwards. He asked only for one year. One year's engagement. He was going abroad. He (this very honestly and without conceit of any kind) believed in himself. Would the Squire grant him one year's grace?

The answer was an uncompromising "No!"

This shattering of his last hope came on a day that saw Matt struggling painfully for life at its birth, and saw Paul Swindon's arrival at its death.

* * * * *

Poor Matt—who alone could have helped Victor out of his troubles, and who knows nothing of them—has for the past ten days been fighting for his life with the malignant fever that had seized him. Day by day the delirium had grown fiercer, his pulse lower. His wild, strange, terrible ravings of events connected with his past melancholy life had gone to Victor's heart. Just now he is lying prostrate, almost lifeless, and Victor, bending over him, tells himself with a sinking of the heart that hope is at an end. But the doctor makes him a little sign, and presently a faint sobbing breath coming from the apparently lifeless body tells him that there may still be a chance.

It is at this moment that a servant, approaching Victor, whispers hurriedly, apologetically, in his ear:

"We heard no ring or knock, my Lord, but George says Mr. Swindon is in the library."

CHAPTER XXII.

“A good sword out of worthless steel can ever any make?
Ay, Hakeem! waste no patience for a wicked person's sake.
The rain, that in its gracious fall did never favour know,
Brings tulips forth in gardens, but makes weeds in swamps
to grow.”

WORN out and sad at heart, Victor enters the library. The lamps have been lit, although through the open windows one can still see the daylight gleaming palely on the terraces and lawns; through the conflicting lights he can see, too, a tall, heavy figure.

It is the figure of a man standing near the wall, a little to the right of the chimney-piece. Of course it is Paul Swindon; but what on earth is he doing there, standing with his face to the wall. He is quite close to it, indeed, and one of his hands is raised as if feeling it. . . . In his astonishment Victor makes a quicker movement, and the tall man turns round abruptly, almost convulsively.

“Ah, you!” says he; he pauses, and it might, perhaps, occur to a sharp observer that he is pulling himself together,—recovering from a shock, as it were. “I must say you didn't hurry yourself.”

He is tall and ungainly, distinctly ill-made, indeed, and on the top of his many feet rests a head much too small for his size. He is florid and very vulgar in appearance; and, to add to his iniquities, he carries about with him a smile that he fondly believes to be becoming, but that usually breeds in the minds of his acquaintances—he has no friends—a desire to kick him. Dissipation is stamped deeply on every feature.

“At last!” repeats Victor, coldly. “It was only this moment I heard you were here.”

“I found the hall-door open,” says Swindon, who might have said the window, “and came in here, thinking to find you. I rang and rang, but nobody answered me. All gone, perhaps?” with a sneer.

“I am sorry you have been kept waiting, but I fear I must be as deaf as the rest of the household, as I, too, heard no ring.”

“Out, perhaps?” suggests Swindon, who had been told that Victor would be at Colonel Eyre’s this afternoon, and who had been considerably foiled in a little business he has on hand by finding him thus unexpectedly at home.

“No; with one of my servants who is very ill,” returns Victor, briefly.

It is the first time he has been face to face with Swindon for many years. Once or twice as a boy he had met him, and cordially disliked him. If he had fancied at times that the dislike was un-

deserved, was the mere outcoming of a silly school-boy's prejudice for this or that, he is now undeceived. During those former meetings Swindon had seemed to him suave, if vulgar; now all the suavity is gone, and the vulgarity is rampant. There is, too, a rude triumph in his manner not to be misunderstood. It occurs to Victor that he has been drinking.

"One of your servants! 'Pon my soul, I like that. How many does your lordship keep on three hundred a year?"

Victor's blood flames, but he subdues himself.

"For the present, those whom my uncle left here."

"Well, they won't be here long, eh? About as long as you'll be. You'll have to clear out of this yourself soon, eh?"

"That is my own affair," says Victor, still with superb restraint. "However, I presume you have not come this evening merely to speak of my servants. What is your business?"

"Why, about the clearing out, of course," says Swindon, who has had time to formulate a story. "You'll want to let this house, eh? Ha! Ha!" He straddles his legs on the hearth-rug and laughs aloud. "What a sell for you, eh? Thought to oust me out of the rhino, to have it all your own way; but luck's gone bad, you see. It's my turn now, and, by George, I shouldn't advise you to

expect any mercy at *my* hands. Snivellers like you should go to the wall, and to the wall *you've* gone! You've had your day, my immaculate cousin, but I come in hands down at the end."

"You are my uncle's heir," says Victor, calmly, looking him contemptuously up and down. "But, in spite of that, I should like to remind you that you are in my house."

"Your house! Fine airs, by Jove! *My Lord*, with three hundred a year! Well, look here now. I'm not spiteful, you know. I bear no malice, though I'm quite aware that you did your level best to smash me with the old man, and to do me out of the money he left me. I don't blame you, you see, for the simple reason that I'd have done the same myself."

He pauses, and, leaning forward, begins to bite his nails—a favourite recreation of his. In this way he fails to see the look of disgust that crosses Victor's face.

"You bring me up to what I have to say," says he, presently. "'*My house*,' as your lordship, ha! ha! calls it, can't be of very much use to you under the present circumstances. Three hundred a year, you know, doesn't run far. Therefore, it seems to me a reasonable thing that, as *I* have the money and you have only the husks, you might as well rent the old place to me, eh?"

"No!" says Victor, sharply, quickly. It is a

discourteous answer, and after a moment he acknowledges this and goes on again. "As a fact, I have not made up my mind about letting this place to anybody."

"Oh, there is a question about it, then? Well, as I am the first, may I hope that you will give me the preference?"

"No!" says Victor again, and this time decidedly. He has lost all sense of discourtesy. He feels raging! No—*never*! He will not give the grand old place and its pure memories into the hands of a reprobate like this.

"What the devil do you mean?" asks Swindon, coarsely.

"Only what I say. If I have to find a tenant for this house, it will not be you." He has risen, and is staring Swindon fair in the face.

"And why, may I ask?"

"It is not necessary to go into it."

"I say *it is*! Confound you for a fool," says Swindon, violently. "Do you believe I'm going to stand this——"

There is a spring forward on Swindon's part, an alert movement on Victor's, and then a closing and a sharp struggle.

Naturally the victory goes to the man trained, young, sober in every sense, and when Swindon rises from the corner into which he had been flung, Victor points to the window.

"Go!" says he, his eyes flashing.

Swindon looks at him, and then, as if compelled, moves towards the window.

"I am going," snarls he; "but mark this, Mowbray, I'll come back again. You'll have to let this house, and I'll outbid all bidders, and when I'm master here——"

"Go!" says Victor again. His face is now very white. The contempt seems to enter into Swindon's brain (one had nearly said his soul) and enrages him.

"Take care, take care!" says he. Standing on the ledge of the window, (well out of reach, by the way,) he shakes his fist at Victor. "I have you in the hollow of my hand, you fool, and there I'll keep you."

He is gone now, through the softly dying daylight, the more softly coming night. Victor, feeling a little stunned, stands still a moment running his hand slowly over his head. What had the brute been doing when he stood at that wall there? Going up to it quickly, he gazes narrowly at it. Nothing but roses and lilies delicately painted by some old painter's hand, and now yellowing as time goes by. Strange, his standing like that! And then his last words: "I have you in the hollow of my hand!" Pshaw! What rubbish the whole thing is. A paltry bit of bombast; a theatrical outburst quite in keeping with the man himself.

He is conscious, however, of a sense of unrest,

a longing for movement. The grand, calm night outside attracts him to it with its faint winds and silvery stars, and the sad, sweet moaning of the waves from far away,—

“ With stars and sea-winds in her raiment
Night sinks on the sea.”

The open window draws him ; and then comes a side thought. Matt ! how is he now ? He slips down quickly to the sick lad’s room to find him sleeping peaceably ; though looking spent and worn to the point of death, he still has something of the hue of life upon his wan features, and, perhaps, who knows, after many days, he may yet walk upon this earth again.

And now, *now* he is in the open air at last with the sky “thickly strewn with silver stars” above his head. The joy of swift motion takes hold of him, and he begins to walk faster, ever faster. Oh, the delight of it ! the bare physical charm of it ! It dominated him so entirely that it is only after he has pressed on and upwards for three miles or so that he wakes to wonder where he is, and finds himself on the top of the Bigly hill that commands a splendid view of the ocean and runs straight down to the gates of “The Court.” The soft dews of the night, mingled with the faint uprising mists of the sea, rest refreshingly, with a little salt savour, on his lips, giving him strength ; whilst below on

the broad bosom of the ocean lies the white, silvery, tremulous shadow of the moon, now sinking, now rising.

This vast, great sea, that nothing can move or change, steadies him. Presently he runs down the hill again with a view to going homewards, but at the end of it lie the gates of "The Court;" and there, leaning against them, looking pensively through the bars, is Madge!

CHAPTER XXIII.

"The strange winds sigh above
The bending trees,
And strange and sad days, love,
May follow these.
What care we, darling, now,
Since love, sweet love, is ours,
For Winter blasts that rob
The Summer flowers."

"Is that you, Madge?"

"Oh, is that *you*?" A happy light springs into the girl's eyes. "Victor, to think of your being here to-night!"

"Why should you not think of it? Do you know that I have been here last night and the night before. Ah! and at your window, too."

"Oh! oh!" whispers she; she stretches out her hands to him through the bars, and he takes them, kissing them tenderly.

"Let me in!" says he, in a whisper.

"I can't. Don't you know that father has the gate locked at eight sharp. No, we must just see each other like this—as though we were criminals—through prison bars."

"Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage,"

quotes Victor, with a vigour that sounds to Madge to have a certain frivolity in it.

"Ah! you can laugh."

"I can do more than that," retorts he; "I can climb." And, lo! before she has time to be afraid for him, because of those spiked barbs above, he is at her side. It takes but a moment after this to find that their arms are round each other.

"Oh, but it is hopeless, hopeless!" sobs she, presently. "Father will *never* give his consent."


"I know that. His letters—his *last* letter left that beyond doubt. You know what I told him; that I was going abroad to seek *my* fortune and *yours*! He would not listen. But you, Madge; you will listen: you will wait for me? It seems selfish to ask it; but, after all, I don't believe it is, because I shall get on, darling. I know it: I shall conquer fortune."

"I don't care about fortune," says the girl, with a little sob in her throat.

"Oh! but I do, when it is for you—for you. And if you care for me as I care for you, my dearest, you will not mind waiting; because I could not be happy without *you*, and you——"

He stops as if for an answer, but the clinging of her arms around his neck is one so eloquent that no man could have desired a greater.

"Your father, I know, will not countenance me in any way."



"Ah, I shall never forgive him *that!* Never! To send such a letter to you."

"Perhaps he was right," says Victor, gloomily. And then: "No, he was not. He," passionately, "was wrong! He should have given me my chance. He should have heard me. A year, a year only out of our lives, was all I asked. If after that I was not in a position to claim you, or, at all events, on the road to it, then he might have cast me off! But a year of separation between you and me would not have been much out of our lives when we are so young. Just from this month to this month next year—— Not so much after all, Madge."

But she does not seem to see it in this light. All at once, to his grief and horror, she bursts into tears.

"Oh, it *is!* it *is!*" cries she. "A year! a whole year! Twelve horrible long months! I don't think you can love me as I love you, when you speak so lightly of it."

"How can *you* speak to me like that?" His arms tighten round her. "How can you hurt me so? Don't you know how it is with me? That my heart is breaking when I think of leaving you."

"Forgive me!" cries she, clinging to him; "but so many sorrows coming together—— Do you know that to-morrow is the day for the operation on Vincent's eyes?"

"Yes, I heard," says he, sadly. "I pray God it may be successful. I shall be here long enough to hear about the result before I sail."

"Before you sail?" Her tone is startled. She stands back from him, her hands pressed against her heart.


"I go in a week," says he, in a low voice.

"Oh! not so soon," cries she. Bitter weeping overtakes her, and she leans sobbing on his breast.

"The sooner I go the sooner I shall be back," whispers he, pressing her face against his and striving to drag some comfort out of their mutual misery. "But a year!" he had been bent once again on making small of that round period, but suddenly his courage fails him. "A year! oh, you are right! It is a long time,—a lifetime, often. Madge, darling, you will not forget me: you," in agonized tones, "will wait for me?"

"Forget! What do you take me for? Ah! is that what *you* will do? But," with a view to casting coals of fire upon his head, "do not think I distrust you. No! no, indeed!" only with a faint undoing of her last speech. "However it may be with *you*, I shall wait and wait, and think and think of you, and you only, until you come back to me again."

There is something in the steadfast glance of her eyes that convinces him of the truth of her



words. Yes, she will wait for him, long for him, year by year, and cling to him only,—

“Though father an’ mither an’ a’ should go mad.”

“Oh, Madge!” cries he, suddenly, slipping his young arms round her; “what a darling you are! But don’t talk of distrust. An ill word, dearest, and an unjust one. There is but a single thought in life for me, and that is you!”

“And yet you will go away and leave me,” says she, reproachfully.

“You know why I go. If I did not, how could I ever hope to see you again? And do you think I *want* to go? . . . But go I must, for all that.”

“In a week?” A little sob breaks from her again. “Then this is good-bye?”

“Oh, no! I *must* see you again!” exclaims he, miserably. “Surely your father is not so bitter against me because of misfortunes as to deny me one last meeting with you. I will not believe it. But even if it were true, Madge——” He is holding her hands in his as if his life depended on their small strength, and is looking earnestly through the moonlight into her face. “Even if he *did* refuse, you would be true,—you would not fail me. You *would* meet me again?”

“I shall never fail you,” says she, with all the solemnity of a first young love. “I shall see you again before you go. Be sure of that, Victor.

Be sure, too——” She breaks down here, and all the solemnity goes to the winds. In a moment he finds her arms around his neck, her cheek against his! “A week! a *week!*” sobs she; “oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?”

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Love is not to be reason'd down."

It is a sad, sad parting! yet in spite of that—and the wretched homeward walk and her tear-dimmed eyes—it is with a proud look that Madge marches into the library to face her father, and Mrs. Egerton, and Vincent.

"Where have you been?" demands the Squire, rising, and regarding her with angry eyes; it is, indeed, well after nine o'clock, and good time for a father to be angry.

"At the gate," a little defiantly.

"At the gate at this hour," says the Squire, with growing indignation. "For what?"

Madge flings up her head.

"I went there, because the night was fine, and I wanted to be alone. When I had been there for ten minutes or so, Victor Mowbray came, and—I stayed to talk to him."

"You met him by appointment," says the Squire.

The girl's eyes blaze.

"John! take care!" says Mrs. Egerton.

"I *am* taking care!" The Squire flashes round a glance at her. "I am taking care of my own.

Of my poor 'sweetheart's' children. Who is to care for them if I do not?" He turns back again to Madge, who is standing pale, frowning, waiting.

"You will give up this Victor Mowbray. Do you hear?"

"I shall not," says the girl distinctly. Mrs. Egerton makes an imploring sign to her, but Madge is beyond seeing signs just now. "*Never!*" says she, with a strange strength for one so young.

Here there is a little rustle in the room, as of one moving uncertainly, and Madge suddenly finds Vincent's hand upon her arm.

"Wait, Madge, wait," whispers she.

"You defy me, then," exclaims the Squire, furiously.

"So far." Madge's face is very white, and she presses her own hand with almost convulsive force on the gentle one upon her arm. "Father, I may not be able to *marry* Victor, but to give him up! *no!* That is impossible. And——" Here, in spite of her heroic resolve to be calm, she bursts into a storm of tears. "Oh! *can't* I see him once again?" cries she.

"Certainly not. I——"

"Oh, come, Squire!" says Batty, who had entered the room a minute or two ago, and has taken in the situation. He would have gone on, but Vincent breaks in eagerly,—

"He is going, you know, papa,—going far away——"

"In a week, too," supplements Mrs. Egerton, who seems to know more than most about it. As a fact, Colonel Eyre had told her that, and several other things this morning.

"I must. I *will* see him again!" sobs Madge, vehemently. "Auntie! help me!"

Poor Mrs. Egerton, thus appealed to before "the Grand Panjandrum himself," grows nervous and "perplexed in the extreme." She looks anxiously round her, but help there is none.

"Perhaps to-morrow—your father——" stammers she, and, like all people who try to sit on two stools, she comes to the ground.

"How dare you hint at such a thing, Henrietta!" roars the Squire. "My mind is made up, I tell you. With my consent she shall never see him again."

"Oh, hang it all, Squire!" exclaims Batty, whose wrath has been gradually rising. "If a girl can't say good-bye to the fellow she—er—loves, when he is going off at a moment's notice to the Antipodes, the world must be a far more beastly place than I have yet believed it."

The Squire turns upon him angrily, his face flaming, his whole air annihilating. But before he can speak Vincent has laid a hand upon his lips.

"Be good to her, papa. Do! What Batty

says is quite, *quite* true. Think how sad it must be for her. Papa, *do* be kind to her. At least, give her time—to think.”

The Squire hesitates; but Vincent can always sway him.


“Oh, I’ll give her time,” says he at last, frowning. “I’ll give her till to-morrow to think it out.”

“And *you*,” goes on Vincent, softly,—“you will promise to think it out yourself too—until to-morrow.” To-morrow! she sighs heavily. What will to-morrow bring *her*? The chance of light, the chance of darkness, for ever. This recollection comes to the Squire, too.

“Oh, there,—there,—I promise anything!” cries he, passionately. He puts her back hastily but very, *very* tenderly from him, and dashes in an extraordinary temper from the room.

“Ah!” cries Vincent, faintly. She puts out her hand, and, grasping a chair, sinks into it.

“This has been too much for her,” says Mrs. Egerton, hurriedly falling on her knees beside her. “Vincent darling, you must not distress yourself!” She makes a slight but sharp movement to the other two, who at once move away carefully through the doorway, Madge still weeping bitterly, if silently. “You must keep quiet, my darling child. Think of to-morrow. Oh, why,” miserably, “did they agitate you like this!”



"I am glad I knew," says Vincent, gently. "And I *am* thinking of to-morrow. When it is all over, if I recover, I shall speak to father again. He will not refuse me anything then: not even this about Madge. But," with a little shiver, "*shall* I recover, auntie?"

CHAPTER XXV.

"Sadly thou gazest upon me,
 Sadly thine eyes meet mine,
And down thy soft cheeks slowly
 Steal pearly drops of brine."

SHE does! The operation proves a complete success, and the great man who has come down from town to perform it, and the lesser light he brought with him in his train, are both unanimous in their opinion that Vincent's sight will be restored to her. Not in all its entirety perhaps; but with great care and with some special glasses she will certainly see as well as a great many people, who never dream that they cannot see as clearly as their neighbours.

Already now, when only four days have gone by, little tests have been used, and so far all is satisfactory. Yes,—in answer to Mr. Grace's nervous enquiry,—in a fortnight or so, the bandages may be removed from her eyes—just for a few minutes, to let her look on all around her. But there must be no haste, no hurry. The great man bows himself away with a cheque in his pocket that runs into three figures!

One of the first things Vincent had done when

she had come back to her senses was to send for her father. And the Squire came trembling, speechless, and kneeling beside her bed, scarcely daring to press the little pale hand held out so uncertainly to him, listened to her. The darkness of the room, the silence, the careful step of the nurse at the end of it, all made for his subjugation. He was awed, yet thankful to his heart's core, and but that tears were an unknown quantity to him since he lost his "sweetheart" he could hardly have kept from weeping aloud.

In this condition it was easy enough for Vincent to get from him any promise she might desire.

"Papa, is that you?" the faint voice came from the darkened bed.

"It is—it is, my darling." The Squire's voice was broken.

"I want you to do something for me."

"Oh, anything, my poor little child." Almost she seemed to the Squire at this moment a baby of three years old again.

"You will let Madge say good-bye to Victor?"

Even at this supreme moment the Squire hesitated.

"Oh, you won't refuse me *now*!" cried Vincent, with a weak, a heartrending sob.

"No—no—anything. Anything!" cried the Squire. "It shall be as you wish. Lie still,—compose yourself, my darling."

Thus the consent was gained, and Vincent, having obtained it, sank back on her pillow with a sign of utter relief.

Madge she feared, she *knew*, and she did not blame her, would have made a way for herself to see Victor for the last time, though "father an' mither an' a' should go mad!" But it gave the gentle Vincent great peace to know that she should see him *with* her father's knowledge. She knew, too, lying there prone upon her sad and darkened bed, that, in spite of all Madge's wilfulness, it would afterwards be a great comfort to *her*.

* * * * *

And now the day has come for that last sad farewell. Victor during the previous week has had several interviews with Mr. Stamer and has made certain arrangements. The Castle must have a tenant found for it, of course. It is impossible to save the old place from going into alien hands; but Victor, with a stern air new to him, had laid a strict embargo on the lawyer. Rather than that it should go into Paul Swindon's possession he would see it fall stone by stone to destruction. Mr. Stamer had nodded his head at that. It was sufficient answer and enabled him to hold a discreet silence. Silence is golden! it seldom compromises one. But in his heart he knew he despised Paul Swindon almost as much as Victor did, and hated him even more.

To-day has dawned wet and chilly. The last day that Victor is likely to see for many years in the old home that has grown so dear to him. The only real home indeed that he has ever known. Sad at heart, he has called up the servants to bid them a farewell that is likely to prove for ever. One by one he says good-bye to them, giving to each a little present, that can but badly be spared out of his slender resources. But not one has he forgotten.

Breaking at last with a choking in his throat from their sobbing words of grief and regret, he runs quickly down-stairs to where Matt is still lying in his bed; better certainly, and with the tempting prospect of "getting up" held out to him by the doctor, but very weak, and knowing too often those sad little relapses towards the old terrible insensibility, out of which he has only just emerged.

He is quite conscious to-day, but yet it is with difficulty that Victor explains to him the fact that he is leaving him, that he is going away. Away, far beyond his reach, his touch. Victor is feeling a little nervous, knowing the almost passionate attachment that the lad has conceived for him, but slowly, slowly, the truth reaches the tired brain. And then comes a touch of memory.

"But why, sir? Why are you goin'? This is your own house, anyway."

"Yes, yes," says Victor, very sadly. "But no

money, Matt. No money, you see, to keep it up. A good old house, and a good old name——” The poor boy himself breaks down a little here, and has to get up and tramp round the room a bit. “You see that’s why I’m going. To get the money. And you shall help me, Matt. I’ll send for you, never fear. But I must go abroad to find that money. And not only for the old name’s sake, either. Not only for that, but for something—someone even dearer.”

He pauses, and Madge’s lovely, *loving* face rises before him. Oh, for her! To gain *her* what heroic deeds may not be done!

“And see here, Matt,” he goes on presently, much refreshed and encouraged by this mental glimpse of Madge. “It won’t be for *ever*. My going, you know! I shall come back some day, and so shall you. But in the meantime, before you can join me, I have made matters all right with Mr. Stamer about you. A little sum of money, you know, to keep you going until I can send for you, and,” tightening gently his grasp on the thin, fever-wasted hand in his, “to help you to be straight and as I would *have* you be, until we meet again. Which,” cheerily, “sha’n’t be a long way off, either. Though I do think, Matt, you’ll keep straight for my sake and—the friendship between us, if I never left you a penny.”

The sick boy lifts his head from the pillow:

a great flush has suffused his face,—his eyes are brilliant. He opens his dry lips as if to speak,—to give voice to all the vehement gratitude that is in his heart,—and—and something else, too, that persistently evades him; but the effort is beyond him. He sinks back miserably.

“Oh, if I could tell you—tell you!” moans he, feebly.

“Nonsense! As if I didn’t know!” says Victor, hurriedly. “What an ass you are!” His tone is full of fear for the boy, who now seems quite unstrung: after all he is nearly as young as the stricken lad before him, and the old boyish phrases come back to him. “I’m not going so far that you can’t come to me, and——”

“But——” Matt has rallied from his late weakness. “Why go, sir? When it’s yours,—all yours.” He has not yet arrived at the thought that Victor is now “My Lord.” “The old gentleman he told me—He——” He lifts his hand to his head as if striving with his memory. “He said——” He pauses again hopelessly, having lost once more the thread of his argument. “There was that thing he showed me,” he mumbles presently, almost inaudibly. “And, besides, he said—said—*after* his death—I might——”

“Yes, yes, I know,” says Victor, gently, seeking to calm him. No doubt the servants had told him he was to inherit everything. “He meant

me to be his heir, I think, at one time; but you see he died before he had time to make his will. Or else——” the cruel doubt rising within him again. “He changed his mind.”


“Dead! Is he dead?” cries Matt, violently. He makes an effort to sit up and fling the bedclothes from him. There is something to be remembered now. Something that *must* be remembered, but still his memory plays him fatal tricks.

“Lie down, Matt!” Victor has thrown his arms round him, but the tussle to get him back into bed again is severe. Matt is fighting with a certain scene in the past!

“No, sir; no. I saw it, I tell you. ‘When I’m dead,’ says he. I wrote on it—I—It’s in——”

Suddenly his strength gives way, and he falls back almost insensible upon his pillow: his eyes enlarged and strained, as if trying to drag the secret that is lost from his dull brain.

Victor covers him up carefully again with the bedclothes, whispering comforting words to him the while, and renewing his promise to send for him. And at last seeing him quiet once more, and much blaming himself for exciting him at all, he presses Matt’s limp hand in a warm clasp, and sick at heart and heavy with grief leaves him. The kind and good God only knew if he should ever see him again.



And now there is no time to spare. He sails to-morrow morning, and there is still that last, that saddest of all farewells to be said.

He goes with quick steps, but with a heart like lead, towards "The Court."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Yet, tottering as I am and weak,
Still have I left a little breath
To seek within the jaws of death
An entrance to that happy place,
To seek the unforgotten face
Once seen—once reft from me.
Anigh the murmuring of the sea."

For full five minutes after he is gone Matt lies motionless, as though dead, or sleeping. Then a little touch of memory comes to him and he stirs, —stretching out his arms wearily as if in search of something. Something not to be replaced.

He is gone! The young master. The only friend he has ever had.

This is the first, the overpowering thought; a crushing one indeed! but after it comes another, almost as troublesome to the tired brain. *Why* must he go! There is something—something to prevent that surely. But how—where? And what was it the old Lord had said?

Slowly his fevered brain centres itself, not so much on Victor as on the old man, and on that past afternoon when he had stood in the library, and had called to him—and——

A little wave of memory flings itself across

the brain again, and out of it Matt comes triumphant. On the table *there* as it were,—he stretches out his wasted hand towards the little table on which his medicine-bottles lie,—on that very table the paper lay; and——

He laughs feebly to himself at this great discovery, then grows worried again.

What was the paper,—what was it? He wrote something on it, and the old man had stood—stood. On the hearth-rug was it? or near the wall?

Hah!

All at once full consciousness comes to him, and with it a strange, wild return of strength. Emaciated, and only half alive because of the virulent fever that has laid him low, still the lad in a very ecstasy of delight drags himself into a sitting posture.

The wall—the opening in it near the red roses! And the paper that he and Mason had signed? The will! It must have been the old Lord's will leaving all to the young master. And it is hidden away there, where no one can find it, behind the red roses—and where no one knows of it, except himself—and he—— He to be the one to find it!

Oh, now he *does* believe in Heaven! To him it has been granted the glorious task of restoring to the only man who has ever been kind to him—the thing he most desires.

He springs out of bed and, with feverish

haste and almost superhuman strength, huddles himself into some clothes.


The opening in the wall,—the paper,—the roses on the paper,—*all* seem to dance before his eyes. But a mad excitement keeps him up. Hah! he will be the one to find that will, to give back everything to the young master. Dead! The old Lord is dead. And when he was dead, he said that he, Matt, might speak, but not before, or things might go bad with the young master. But now that is all over; the old Lord is dead, and he——

He is out in the passage by this time, and is clambering up the stairs, his breath coming faster and faster. Now it is beating hard against his side, and now he has come to the library and has opened the door that leads to the northern wing of the house, and from that to the servants' quarters.

This door is already a little ajar; the same door through which the late Lord Mowbray had seen Victor talking to Matt on his last visit to Braystown.

A big screen now, as then, stands before the opening of the door just inside the room to keep out a perpetual draught from the lower regions, and Matt, entering with very little noise, stands still a moment behind it.

Surely there is some one here. His old and distinctly disgraceful instincts stand him in good




stead now. He comes to a sudden halt behind the screen and peeps through the chinks of it.

All at once he grows as alert as a young terrier. His weakness disappears altogether, and the strength as of ten men enters into him. Who is that standing near the very wall he has come to see? A tall man, with red hair and a furtive manner and a glance that shifts nervously from right to left. Matt had never heard of Paul Swindon, but now he crouches back against the wall behind the screen and, falling on his knees, watches intently through the openings in the joints the proceedings of this distinctly suspicious red-haired man.

The latter, as though he had heard Matt's light footsteps, glances cautiously, guiltily, around him. Then, seeing nothing, moves nearer to the wall, nearer to the roses. He lifts his hand, presses it sharply on something,—Matt cannot see what,—and lo! the same marvellous thing happens as in the old Lord's time,—a big square in the solid wall flies open, disclosing a little cupboard to the view.


Once again Matt grows cold with fright. Is this thing belonging to the supernatural, or is it—— A moment later, however, and he has forgotten all about ghosts and supernatural agencies and everything else, save the interests of the one being who had taken him up and befriended him against all odds.



The man standing before the mysterious opening in the wall, after a hurried tumbling over of its contents, now draws out what is seemingly a long white envelope. And now he has torn it open and dragged out a paper, and is running his eyes down it with frenzied haste. All at once it seems to Matt that that piece of paper is familiar to him. It was that he had signed. It was in that strange hiding-place the old Lord had laid it when——

Coming to the edge of the screen and leaning forward, his eyes gleaming as much now with excitement as with fever, he stares at Paul Swindon.

Swindon, unconscious of those burning eyes, still reads rapidly. Rapidly at first, and now more slowly, as his worst fears are confirmed. A letter from the late Lord Mowbray, immediately before his death, had given him to understand that he would have nothing to gain by his will, and it was therefore to his most intense astonishment he learned on his uncle's decease that he was still the heir; that there was no later will than the one leaving all the property to him. Later on, a memory of that secret hiding-place in the wall of the old library had come to him, and with it a strange certainty that the last will of all lay there. Once, on that day when Victor had come so unexpectedly upon him in this very room, he had made an attempt to



search for it, and had been baffled. To-day, beyond all doubt, he knows Victor will be at "The Court," and has chosen his chance of finding and destroying it, if, indeed, it be in existence. To-morrow Mr. Stamer will come down to lock up the rooms and place caretakers in the old house, and the getting at the library may prove more difficult than it is now, when all the windows and doors lie hospitably open.

Yes, yes, here is the will that disinherits him and gives all, *all* to Victor. Still staring at the fatal document, he draws a long breath. He had been right, then. He had guessed the whole truth of the case, even to the hiding-place of this precious paper. He had guessed, but he had not been actually *sure* until now.

The paper rustles in his trembling fingers. The damp breaks out upon his brow. But presently comes comfort. He *alone* knows of it. It might have lain there in that unsuspected cupboard for ever, and none the wiser. It might still lie there in its late resting-place *for ever!* He makes a slight motion as if to put it back again, then pauses. No! it is better to put it out of the way for good and all; no knowing what might occur to bring it to the light of day. Again he looks at it, and suddenly bursts into a subdued, malignant, uncontrollable burst of laughter.

That young idiot with his insufferable airs,

his contemptuous lip, his high-souled notions, his holding *him*, Paul Swindon, as one beneath contempt! And to think *he* is holding *him* now in the hollow of his hand! That it is in *his* power to make or mar him. Oh, the delicious revenge of it! It shall be "mar" to a certainty!

A light fire is burning on the hearth. He takes a step towards it, paper in hand. Hah! how gaily the flames burn! A second, and but a few ashes will remain, and the virtuous Victor will remain a pauper to the end of his days!

He laughs again in a low detestable fashion, and bends downwards. He will burn it slowly to give himself the full joy of his revenge. Letter by letter Victor's fortune shall disappear! Already the leaping darts of fire have almost caught the paper. It begins to shrivel.

Great Heaven! what is that? With a mighty crash the screen has fallen to the floor, and on to Swinton's stooping shoulders something has flung itself. A deadly coward at heart, as are most bullies, Swindon makes but a poor resistance. This strange gaunt foe, whose dark and sunken eyes seem to burn into his, whose coming is so unsuspected, whose grip round his neck is fierce enough to suggest madness,—all these things tend to upset nerves already overstrung by dissipation of many sorts. He tries to rise, making futile efforts to dislodge those clinging fingers; then he loses his last remnant

of self-control. With an oath he drags himself backward, stumbling over a footstool, and, coming in contact with the corner of the table nearest him, falls with terrific force upon the carpet.

Matt falls with him, but recovers himself quickly. Getting on his feet again, and reeling to and fro in his weakness, he looks down. This man, whoever he is, is stunned, and the paper——

In a second Matt has clutched it—has dragged it from the senseless hand beneath him, and, turning, makes for the window through which Swindon had come. The light evening mists seem to swim before his eyes, but love carries one triumphantly over most difficulties, and presently he finds himself outside the window and in the yard.

There, as good chance would have it, sits a groom in a dog-cart, ready to go—somewhere or other.

The *where* doesn't come into Matt's calculations. Staggering forward, his legs feeling very queer under him, and the precious paper clasped in his burning hand, he calls aloud to the groom, who is just mounting to his seat.

"Eh?" says the groom, staring at him. "*Can* this be *Matt*? Why, 'e's in bed, any way!"

Matt lays his hand upon the shaft of the car, as much to steady himself as to claim the groom's attention.

"To 'The Court,' Bill," cries he, violently; "I must go to 'The Court' at once."

"Yer mad, man," says Bill, who, indeed, has some reason for making this actionable remark.

"'Tis life or death, Bill," says Matt, clinging to the shaft with all his last strength. "'Tis for the young master."

The groom, a young man lately engaged, looks nervously round him. Matt, as they all know, has been in a high fever until a day or two ago, and who is to say he has not "gone off 'is 'ead again?"

No other groom or stable-man, however, is near, and——

"Bill," says Matt, "you've *got* to take me. 'Tis for him. If ye love him, take me! I've got *that* here," raising with shaking hand the paper tightly clutched within it, "as 'll give him back to us, and all as he ought to have—an'——"

He has clambered up into the cart now, and Bill, half believing and half disbelieving (yet longing to *believe*) in that paper that Matt holds, because of the soreness that is still in his heart on account of his late parting with his young Lord, here gives in, and starts the mare suddenly at a sharp pace for "The Court."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"I cannot speak, tears so obstruct my words
And choke me with unutterable joy."

AT "The Court" at this moment a very uncomfortable "at home" is being held. Madge, with eyes stained with tears, and with her whole air dejected in the extreme, is sitting in the large drawing-room a few yards away from Victor, to whom she is supposed to be granting a last interview by the gracious will of her father,—and, indeed, it needs *must* be a last interview,—with her father and all the other members of her family present, except, of course, Vincent.

The Squire had hedged to his promise to Vincent. Madge should see her lover again, certainly, but only in his presence; and, in fact, he had so arranged it that Victor's last farewell to Madge should take the innocent character of a farewell to the entire family.

Batty had refused, with some extraordinary language thrown in, to be present at this "auto da fé," as he insisted on calling it, when first the monstrous proposition was laid before him; but afterwards, having thought it over with help from Janet (who was, if possible, more indig-

nant than he was), he had laid down his arms and declared himself ready to assist at this modern form of torture.

Mrs. Egerton had done all she could to gain a private farewell for the poor lovers. She had, indeed, said many things to the Squire, all distinctly uncomplimentary and very unpleasant; but he had refused to listen to her, and had proved harder than adamant.

* * * * *

"I think he *might* have given way just this once," says Janet, who with Batty is standing as far inside the curtains of the third window of the drawing-room as she can get, with a kind of hope, that is utterly futile, of letting Madge and Victor feel themselves alone. *How* can they feel alone, poor, sad, young creatures! with the Squire standing fuming on the hearth-rug—evidently with his ears cocked to hear every word—and Mrs. Egerton, who is looking the picture of misery, pretending, with an air that would not have deceived a baby, to be interested in a long piece of knitting meant for a comforter, and designed for the "Deep Sea Fishers." At this moment she feels much more in need of a comforter than even those toilers of the sea.

But the Squire had requisitioned her for this service, and she had felt herself compelled to obey him; and now, his eye being on her, she sits mute, brooding angrily and with disgust on



the task allotted her, whilst those two "poor children," as she calls them, try to say good-bye to each other by glances and hidden words flung broadcast, if nervously, through the conversation that is being carried on in a truly desultory fashion by the rest of the family.

Tragedy is in the air! Victor, half mad with grief and pain of parting, and Madge, "his other half," feeling as he does, have both decided, by glances that are often so much more eloquent than words, that this bald, miserably cold parting thus forced upon them—this abominably impossible good-bye for two who love each other as *they* do—shall *not* be the scene of the last outpourings of their bursting hearts.

* * * * *

"I think so, too," says Batty, with fine disgust.

"Oh, it's dreadful, dreadful," says Janet, with tears in her eyes. "If Vincent was only here, she would not let him do it. But, of course, she must not be disturbed in any way. I thought of speaking to her, of getting her to make father go farther than the bare promise he made her of letting Madge and Victor see each other once again; but Madge herself would not hear of it. Vincent should not be disturbed in any way, she said, though we all died of it. What could one do after that?"

"What, indeed?" says Mr. O'Grady, thought-

fully. "It's a serious problem. I hope, however, we *sha'n't* die of it! What is 'it,' by the way? Anything catching? *Sounds* like an epidemic."

"Oh, you can make fun of things if you like," says Janet, with a reproachful glance at him. "You have no feeling. You'd smile, I really believe, if every friend you had was dead. But——"

"You misjudge me," says Mr. O'Grady. "I shouldn't smile, for example, if Mrs. Deane-Burnes was dead."


"Mrs. Deane-Burnes," says Janet, a little startled. "Do you call *her* a friend of yours? Why, I thought——" She stops, as if trying to pierce some hidden thought, and then goes on with distinctly increased animosity, "No doubt she *is*, the way you speak to her, and make much of her, and talk to her *horrid* girls!"—*Immense* stress upon the "*horrid*." "I should say you were!"

"Well," says Batty, calmly, who has suffered much from Mrs. Deane-Burnes's advances on the part of her "girls," "I shouldn't smile if *she* were dead." He pauses, to make more significant his coming words.

"Oh, go on," says Janet, irritably. "If you wouldn't smile, what *would* you do?"

"I'd laugh!" says Batty, solemnly.

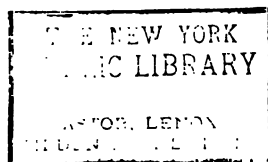
Now this seems a distinctly unchristian thing





"YOU MISJUDGE ME," SAYS MR. O'GRADY.

(Page 252.)



N

to say, yet it does not seem to offend Janet half as much as some of his milder remarks; in fact, she smothers a faint little giggle as he comes to the end of it. After all, he doesn't think so *very* much of those "horrid" girls!

"But we are wandering away from Madge," says she, in a moment or two, with deep compunction. "Papa has been *awful* about her and Victor ever since Lord Mowbray's death. There was one day. You remember it, Batty? Last Tuesday, wasn't it? He—I felt so frightened that I thought that my head wasn't quite steady on my shoulders."

"Was that the first time you thought that?" asks Batty, with an apparent thirst for knowledge.

"It was," says she, not noticing the impertinence. "It seemed to rise from my shoulders and float away into the blue up there," pointing to the sky.

"It came back?" Mr. O'Grady's thirst now seems to have grown to passion-point.

"Oh, yes," laughing, and, indeed, openly flattered by his apparent anxiety, "it came back quite safely, and is now"—laughing again—"glued onto my neck once more."

"*Such* a blessing!" A sigh of pious relief escapes him. A moment later, however, he pauses, and regards her with sudden fear: "Glue melts," says he.

"Oh, if you are going in for one of your

stupid jokes," says Janet, preparing to march, but Batty, catching the skirt of her dress, hauls her back again into position.

"There isn't time for a fight now," says he. "We've got to think of Madge."

"Oh, true!" giving in at once, as she thinks of her sister's trouble. "Batty, do try and find a way out of this for her, if you can. Poor darling old Madge, I can't bear to see her so unhappy."

Her eyes fill with tears, and Batty instantly grows serious.

"I have thought of *one*," says this master of resource; "but if I give you the tip, you won't betray me?"

"Oh, *Batty*!"

"A mere question," says he. "Pray, pass it over: I merely meant that if you *did* betray me, I should slay you—dead or alive."

"Would you, indeed?" says Janet, to whom a quarrel is always welcome. "You make a mistake there, I can tell you! It is I who should slay *you*, in all probability, for I'm just as strong as ever you were. And as for your plan," angrily, "I don't believe in it. You can take it away. I don't believe in anything you do. No, I *don't*. And goodness help Madge, say I, if she's got to depend on *you*."

"All right," says Mr. O'Grady; "I'll carry my invention elsewhere."

"Invention, indeed!"

"Ay, madam, and a most excellent one. But it is the fate of genius throughout all ages to be misunderstood. Tubal Cain himself, I believe, was drummed out of court to the music of one of his own inventions! We all have our maligners. I'm content," sadly, "to tread in the feet of the great ones who have gone before me,—to run in their splendid groove. But when you find your sister lying in the Slough of Despond, you will, perhaps, be sorry *then* for the hour in which you dismissed your humble servant."

He takes a step forward.

"I certainly sha'n't be sorry for *that*," says Janet, with dignity. "But if you *can* do anything for Madge—— No—no—— *Do* come back, Batty——" as he almost vanishes through the curtains.

He lets his face appear again, but no other part of him. Evidently his legs are *bent* on going.

"Oh, what a wretch you are!" says she, indignantly.

At this even his *face* goes; and it is not until Janet has started after him and caught his coat-tails, and so drags him back again into the shelter of the window, that she discovers he had never really meant to go at all.

"Just to try you," says he. "I *knew* you couldn't get on without me. Well, look here; will you listen to my plan, or will you not?"

"Oh, I'll listen!" says she, the more scornfully, because of her late defeat.

"It's this, then. Let us all, when Victor says good-bye to her, propose to escort him to the gate. The Squire will never run to *that*, but he will believe Madge to be all right if *we* go with her. There's 'safety in a multitude,' you know, as the old saying has it—though I'm not so sure about that, myself. Well, when half-way to the gate, you, and I, and the others—we can always depend on Mrs. Egerton—will scoot down one of the nearest pathways, and so leave the poor things to say good-bye to each other, with all the melancholy in the world. There's nothing *half* so sweet as melancholy, you know."

"What a good thought," says Janet. "Really, for *you*, it is a most sensible one." She is feeling, indeed, somewhat impressed by this arrangement of his.

"For me! Didn't you know I was the proverbial Rock! But honestly, Janet, I am sorry for them. It does seem real hard lines that they can't say good-bye to each other comfortably."

"It does—it does!" with a sigh. "I do think papa—is—well—is——"

She hesitates, as if for a word.

Mr. O'Grady generously supplies it. "A regular old Hunks!" says he, briefly but beautifully.

"Batty!" she turns upon him with extreme indignation. "How dare you use such a word!

I will thank you to remember that the person you—you thus misname is *my* father!"

"I know it, my poor dear girl!" says he, with the deepest, the most sincere sympathy. "Would it were otherwise! Do you think I don't feel for you? Why, I——"

There is no chance of knowing now the tremendous answer Janet has prepared for him,—a little movement in the group outside checking it as it lies upon her lips.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"All desp'rate hazards courage do create,
As he plays frankly who has least estate;
Presence of mind and courage in distress
Are more than armies to procure success."

THE last moment has come for the unhappy lovers. Victor had waited, hoping from minute to minute that the Squire would relent—would make some excuse for leaving him alone with Madge for the sad farewell that is now so near. But the Squire stood firmly to his guns. He knew no relenting. Planted on the hearth-rug, slapping his legs with frowning impatience with the little riding-whip in his hand, he persuades himself in his narrow soul that he is doing all he can for his dead "sweetheart" and her eldest girl by refusing to let her pledge herself still further to this penniless boy. If only poor Madge's mother had been alive to-day, she could have taught him, perhaps, a better and truer wisdom.

But, alas! for the lovers, she is dead, and Victor, rising, with grief strongly mingled with rage in his heart, is standing, bidding good-bye to Mrs. Egerton, whose kindly heart is aching for him. His own heart seems on fire with the injustice of the whole thing. *Why* had he consented to this

arrangement? Why had he not urged Madge to resist her father's authority and meet him once again—only once again—alone—before he left her, as it might well be, for ever?

Mrs. Egerton presses his hands warmly; she would have dearly liked to kiss him, but the Squire's presence numbs her, and a choking sensation in her throat prevents her from speaking. But Victor understands, and something in her kindly, if silent sympathy, but much more in the glance he catches of Madge's face—white, cold, miserable—wakes in his breast a sudden wild resolve.

Dropping Mrs. Egerton's hands, he walks straight up to the Squire.

"Mr. Grace," says he, and his tone is not so much conciliatory—as, perhaps, it ought to have been, if he hoped to win his cause—as cold and stern, "Cannot I say good-bye to Madge alone?"

"I think not," says the Squire, twitching his brows. "Better not; no good to be gained by it."

"So much good at least that we should remember our parting with less bitterness."

"And with greater constancy! I am sorry, Victor, that I must refuse this last request."

"Not my last one," says the young man, restraining his passionate revolt against this cruelty with great difficulty. "I have still one more

thing to ask you: you will give your consent to our engagement?"

"A very ill-timed remark," says the Squire, frowning; "an engagement between you and my daughter! No! And I hardly think it a manly thing of you, sir, under the circumstances, to ask this of me. I have known you for many years, Victor, and your late uncle was a friend of mine, so that I would, if possible accede to any *reasonable* request of yours; but this is *not* reasonable. However, not to seem too hard, I will make one concession. You have written to me, saying it is probable that in some foreign land you will be able to make your fortune; well, should my daughter not receive a *suitable* proposal until you have made that fortune, I shall then willingly give her to you."

It is a ridiculous concession, as all who hear know very well. Pretty Madge, with a handsome fortune at her back, to be left long without that "suitable proposal," is a preposterous idea, and one can well understand what pressure would be brought to bear upon her when the rich suitor threw the handkerchief. Batty, always impulsive, and not in the least afraid of the Squire—a fact that, perhaps, has been the principal lever in the Squire's undoubted liking for him—starts forward from between the curtains to put in a scathing denunciation of this last act of his, but a little gesture from Madge stays him.

She—nerved, calm, yet white to the lips—has stepped forward; she does not look at her father, or at anyone but Victor. To him she speaks.

“Though every man in the world should ask me to marry him, Victor, I should say no to all. I shall wait for you forever!”

“Madge, you forget yourself!” cries her father, furiously.

“Perhaps!” says she. “I shall at all events never forget Victor!”

“Oh, Madge!” cries the young man, in low but passionate tones. He takes a step towards her, holding out his hands, and then, all in a moment, the poor child’s enforced calm gives way, and with a bitter cry she flings herself into his arms.

The Squire, with a fierce ejaculation, strides forward—already his hand is on Madge’s shoulder—already Victor’s arm is raised to fling him back, when suddenly the door is burst violently open, and some one stumbles, rather than rushes, into the room.

A tall, gaunt, half-dying creature, with blazing eyes that look out with strange inconsistency from a face that already seems grey with the approach of death.

For a moment he stands upright, clutching at the door for support, and looking wildly round him, as if in search of something.

“Matt!” cries Victor, horrified. The lad’s

eyes turn to him, and, letting go the door, he bursts into a loud laugh—the laugh of delirium.

“I ’ave it ’ere!” he cries, lifting his hand and waving in the air a paper tightly clasped within it. “’Tis all yer own! all yer own! I *told* you ’twas! All—all! And the devil’s dead, sir! I’ve killed him! Come home, master, come home! ’Tis all! all——”

He makes a desperate rush forward to where Victor is standing, too astonished to move, and falls headlong in a crumpled heap at his feet.

In a second Victor is on his knees beside him, with Mrs. Egerton and Madge; Batty has run to the dining-room for some brandy.

“He seemed so well when I left him,” Victor is saying, anxiously, whilst lifting him into a more comfortable position; “weak, of course, but on the mend. What on earth can have happened since?”

Matt had fallen with the hand that held the paper *under* him, and it is only now, when they tenderly pull out his arm and raise his head on cushions, that they can see he is holding something in his clinched hand.

“What is that in his hand?” demands the Squire, who, as a magistrate, feels he ought to look into this business.

“I don’t know,” says Victor; “something that has evidently upset him. Poor fellow, I’m afraid he was worse than I thought him. But how did

he get here? In the state I left him, I don't believe he could have walked a yard to save his life."

"He has apparently walked many," says Mr. Grace, in his most official tone. "I think it better to see what this paper contains."

Stooping, he loosens the nerveless fingers, takes the paper from them, and, going to the window, smoothes it out, and begins in a rather bored and careless fashion to run his eye over it.

Two minutes later, however, an exclamation breaks from him.

"Good heavens!" says he, and then again, "Can this be possible?"

The others are all attending to poor Matt, who seems quite exhausted, but now that he is on a sofa, and has had a few drops of brandy poured down his throat, shows some signs of reviving. Victor, in his anxiety about him, has shown no interest in the paper, or indeed felt any—the real value of it being utterly unknown to him. Seeing Matt at last conscious, he springs to his feet.

"I must go!" cries he, with an agonized glance at Madge. And then to Mrs. Egerton, "You will see to him, poor, *poor* fellow. I have promised to send for him later on, but a kind friend *now*!"

"You may trust me," says Mrs. Egerton. "You," very gently and tenderly, and with a glance at Madge, "may trust us *both* to look after him."

"I know it," says Victor, in a choking tone. "Good-bye again, Mrs. Egerton—good——"

"Stay, Victor," calls the Squire, in a loud tone. "It seems to me, looking at *this*," tapping the paper, "that there may be a reason for your not going just at present, . . . perhaps," ponderously, "for your not going *at all*!" He pauses. In his soul he is covered with confusion; and it is little to say that he would have given a good slice out of his income to call back all the unpleasant things he had said to Victor during the few minutes that preceded the somewhat tragic entry of poor Matt.

"What?" says Victor, slowly, and as if not understanding; indeed, how *can* he understand?

"This may be a fraud, of course," says the Squire, pointing to the paper. "But if it is *not*, it makes you sole heir to all your uncle's, the late Lord Mowbray's possessions, both in money and land."

There is a dead silence. It is broken at last by the most unlikely person present. Matt, weak and spent though he is, lifts himself on his elbow.

"True for you, governor!" says he, with a queer little chuckle. "That—wot you've got in yer 'and—*that's* the ticket!"

Victor stands as if stunned. This thing! oh, it is impossible! It *can't* be true. Why, his passage is taken, he is going abroad to—to make

that fortune that is to give him Madge. He can't get beyond that, because some words are most foolishly echoing and re-echoing in his brain. . . "All your own—all;" that was Matt's voice surely, and them—"Sole heir——"

A hand laid lightly on his shoulder rouses him. It is Janet's.

"I think Madge is frightened," says she nervously. And indeed Madge, who has just stood up from Matt's sofa, is looking terribly pale, her eyes large with tears. Quickly he goes to her.

"My darling," he whispers, "if this should be true! What would it *not* mean to us! But I can't help doubting it. Don't believe in it, Madge——"

"Perhaps," says the Squire, coming up to the sofa where Matt is lying, exhausted but happy, "you will be able to explain how you came by this—er—remarkable document."

Matt in a few hurried words tells of his late encounter with Swindon, whom he still persists in regarding as the Devil. But the Squire, who feels himself in a distinctly false position, and who, with a view to keeping up his dignity, is determined not to give in as long as he can with any decency hold out, still dallies with the paper, and hums and haws a bit, with a truly magisterial air.

"A strange story!" says he. "Of course, coming from anyone else, one would be likely

to place some faith in it; but this fellow's antecedents are so——"

"I won't have a word said against his antecedents," says Victor, quickly. He faces the Squire, who tries hard to look him down, but fails. "*Not one.* Of his past we know nothing except by hearsay. Of his present we know everything—and it all redounds to his credit."

"Quite so, quite so!" says the Squire, backing water smartly. "Well then, supposing this story to be true, and that this paper," glancing at it again, "is the last will of your late uncle, I should say——"

"But, sir," breaks in Victor, impatiently.

"Permit me to finish," says the Squire, loftily.

"Permit *me*, however, to say first," says Victor, firmly, "that I think that paper in your hand belongs to me, not to *you*!"

There is an instant's awful pause. Victor to thus beard the Squire! The latter glares at him."

"Yours! How am I to know this is not some nefarious document trumped up by that precious *protégé* of yours? As a magistrate, sir, I——"

Here Batty, who has been standing by the Squire's side, reading the will with him, gives him a little hint.

"The writing, Squire!" suggests he, in a low tone, pointing to the paper. "It is the late Lord Mowbray's, or nobody's."

"It may be," says the Squire, squinting at it

through his glasses. "And, indeed, now that you mention it, it seems to bear an extraordinary likeness to the writing of my late friend. If you insist on it," looking up at Victor, "I shall surrender this document to you, but the responsibility of my so doing must rest with *you*. It may, or may *not*, be the last will and testament of your uncle; for my own part, I have doubts. But if——"

Here Mr. O'Grady's patience reaches its utmost limit. He gives the Squire a most undisguised shove.

"*Nonsense*, Squire! You know as well as I do that it's all right. Don't make a fool of yourself!" breathes he, in what he fondly believes to be a zephyr-like whisper, but which is perfectly audible to all in the room,—thus reducing the Squire's grandiloquence to considerably less than nothing.

The Squire turns angrily upon him.

"What do you mean, sir? *Who* could be sure of the genuineness of a paper thus thrust upon him? Of course I hope, as *all* must hope, that this will is the last, the real one. But to accept it finally, until the truth is beyond all doubt, would be but the mere folly of an unthinking being. If"—turning to Victor—"if, my dear Lord Mowbray——" A sensational thrill runs through all present. It is the first time he has ever accosted Victor by his title.

"If this paper should give you what I, for one, decidedly consider should be your rights, I—believe me—shall be the first to congratulate you."

Such a change of front! Janet flings up her pretty chin, and looks contemptuous,—youth being always specially hard on any lapse from the broad path of virtue; and Mrs. Egerton tells herself she shall never again be afraid of the Squire, even if she has to live with him for a thousand years. But perhaps, after all, she won't have to put in *so* much time with the Squire. There may be some one else—who——

Madge stands motionless and very white; but Victor cannot restrain the smile that widens his lips.

"I accept your congratulations, Mr. Grace," says he, courteously. "But may I hope you will congratulate me on something else far better,—my engagement to your daughter?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

"This bitter love is sorrow in all lands,
Draining of eyelids, wringing of drenched hands,
Sighing of hearts."

THE fortnight suggested at first by the doctors as a probable date for the removal of Vincent's bandages has grown into three weeks.

Little glimpses of light had been allowed her; anxious experiments, that had left both the doctors only the more certain that the operation had been successful, even up to their most sanguine expectations.

"Good heavens!" the Squire moaned, even in the midst of his exultations. "To think that she might have seen me all these years, and didn't."

It was of himself *first* he thought, of course. Perhaps it was not so much selfishness as want of imagination that made him forget all the other things she might have seen as well,—the trees, the flowers, the ever-changing sea, and the eternally-beautiful sky above her.

These primary liftings of the soft bandages across her eyes had let her look (for the briefest interval, of course) on her father, then her sisters, and then Mrs. Egerton.

Cedric she had not seen, nor had he asked to see her. From the first he had been averse to having her eyes touched; not that he openly expressed this aversion, but there was a silence about him, a tacit dislike to the whole affair, not to be misunderstood. There was a good deal of the fanatic in his nature, and to tamper thus with God's decrees struck him as being little less than sinful. And there was another thought, too. If the operation *should* prove successful,—somehow he always felt sure it would,—she would be no longer dependent on him; she would be no longer his.

And now the day has come when the bandages are to be removed for fully ten minutes, during which time Vincent is to see all whom she desires to see within her own family. The Squire, thinking to please her, had stipulated for Cedric's presence, he being her *fiancé* (Cedric, who shrank from the ordeal but could not say so), and for Tom's, too, he being Cedric's brother.

Mrs. Egerton had made strenuous efforts to prevent Tom's being on the scene at this final unveiling of Vincent's eyes, but to her wrath and astonishment he had refused to be set aside; and the Squire could see nothing in her nervous hints—and the girls were positively *stupid*!

* * * * *

It is a brilliant afternoon, although the morning had been sadly wet and depressing, with dull

winds, and rain blowing against the window-panes, and all the park and uplands looking crushed and spiritless. Those melancholy flowers of autumn that to the end make stand against the coming of the angry winter are still holding up their mournful heads; but the others, all, have given way. The hollyhocks are rent and torn, and the

“Asters of palest, delicatest blue
Slender and fragile,”

are lying prone upon their beds sodden through and through by the rain water. They had been accustomed, poor silly things, to think of the warm days only; to

“Lift their golden eyes,
Adoring to the sun, whose warm kiss dries
Their tears of dew.”

Now too forlorn, too altogether spent they lie to feel the late splendour of their capricious suitor as he shines upon them once again.

Sir Ebenezer has come down from town for the last time to-day, to see to the removal of the bandages once more, and then to bid his charming patient—he has almost fallen in love with Vincent—a final farewell. Anything that has to be done after this can be carried out by the local doctor under his directions.

Yes, it is a farewell visit he tells Vincent, with

a desire to instil hope and courage in her, as she stands pale and very still at the end of the library, waiting for him to remove the delicate soft cloths that lie across her eyes and forehead. She knows; it had been thought better to tell her that Cedric Brande would be present when the bandages are being removed and this final trial of her sight takes place. Unfortunately, however, it had occurred to no one, not even to Mrs. Egerton (who no doubt lost sight of it in her agitation), to tell her that *Tom* Brande also would be on the scene!

Vincent at first had begged that Cedric might not be present; a nervous trembling possessed her as she made the request, but the Squire had overruled her wish. And, indeed, after a little while, being always most tenderly amenable to the call of any duty that lay before her, she had seen that possibly she had no right to refuse to let the man she had promised to marry be present on this occasion. Perhaps, had she known of Cedric's secret shrinking from *being* present, she might have felt her sense of duty less oppressive.

"You *really* wish to see him, darling?" Mrs. Egerton had asked when the Squire was gone, holding the girl's hands anxiously, fondly, between her own. "It is an ordeal, I know. But if you are fond of him, if you even honestly *like* him, I agree with your father, and I think you

ought to let him be present. Because then you would *want* to see him——”

She waited, but the girl said nothing, only bent forward, covering her eyes with her hands.

“What is it, darling?”

“Nothing,” in a low voice. “Only I—sometimes I’m *afraid*!”

“Oh, it is so natural!” said Mrs. Egerton, with eager sympathy. “But if you love him, Vincent, and it is not only the *face*,” with curious premonition, “one loves. But if you have a doubt, even now,” *very* earnestly this, “I can still quite easily arrange for you that he shall not be present.”

But Vincent had said no! She would have him there. Yes, he might come. “And it was nothing, nothing; really only nervousness, perhaps, and——”

She stopped there, and somehow Mrs. Egerton could not help thinking that the answer was a little vague, a little unsatisfactory. But she did not dare to question further! An uneasy vision of *Tom Brande* kept her silent. Yet, so strange is the human heart, that when the last, the *vital* moment came, she forgot *Tom Brande* altogether, and so hurried the catastrophe.

* * * * *

And now the doctors are bending over Vincent, who is sitting in a chair quite at the end of the oval room, her father standing on her

right, Mrs. Egerton, with Madge and Janet, on the left. Batty, who, like the poor and proverbial bad halfpenny, is always with us, is leaning against the bookcase, whilst the two Brandes are stationed at the end of the room, almost opposite Vincent as she now is sitting.

Slowly, gently, the doctors remove the bandages, and slowly, nervously, she looks up. To her right first, where she knows her father is standing.

"You, papa!" says she, softly. "I begin," with a little ecstatic laugh that is half a sob, "*to know you now*" (this is the third time she has seen him). "And you, auntie," to Mrs. Egerton, "and Janet, and Madge. Sir Ebenezer," turning to him eagerly, "I can *see*—I can see *really* to-day! And——"

Suddenly her eyes, travelling as yet anxiously, nervously, reach the end of the room, and there she sees two figures. She raises herself slowly to her feet—her face whitens——

"And there——" stammers she. "There!" pointing. "Who is that—*there*?"

"Cedric!" cries Madge, eagerly. "Cedric is there!"

A little nervous, happy laugh breaks from Vincent.

"Cedric!" cries she. "Ah, I *knew* how he would look!"

She makes a quick rush forward; but, alas! it is not towards Cedric she runs. With her lips

parted, and her beautiful, half-awakened eyes alight with love, she holds out her hands to—*Tom!*

Shocked—miserable—horrified, yet half mad with a strange wild joy, he meets her,—his face drawn and white as death. Catching those tender outstretched hands he crushes them between his own. Yet his self-possession never forsakes him. He has *her* to consider.

“*Tom Brande,*” says he to her in a low tone—“not *Cedric!* . . . The merest mistake, Vincent, my dear, *dear* little sister; the very *merest* mistake!”

For a second the eyes, now wide and terrified, look into his; for a second her lips part as if to speak. Then once again the light dies out of the eyes that as yet scarce know it, and even before Mrs. Egerton (who has had her fears all along) can reach her, she has fallen in a dead faint into Tom Brande’s arms.

CHAPTER XXX.

“ But when I saw her start
And turn aside——”

THIS sudden insensibility of Vincent's had naturally caused great consternation. Sir Ebenezer, however, in his very grandest manner, had essayed to calm their fears.

“ She was quite worn out by the excitement ; such occurrences were by no means rare. He was of opinion that it would do her no harm.” But Sir Ebenezer, in spite of his world-wide reputation for cleverness, had not understood *this* situation ; indeed, to his dying day he believed Tom Brande to be the accepted lover.

Vincent had been carried to her room, and it was only when she had come to herself again, and anxiety about her was at an end, that the others began to think of Cedric—and with undisguised dismay. Both Mrs. Egerton and Madge—indeed, *all* of them—had heard that unfortunate cry of “ Cedric,” and had seen the love-light in the poor eyes that so long had lain in darkness, and the fatal mistake that Vincent had made had almost paralyzed them. And *now* who is to go down and have the interview that they all feel is impending with Cedric!

The question goes round. Who? To a man they all refuse. Good gracious, what is one to say? Of course it was a mistake; but Cedric's face had been a picture as she lay in Tom's arms in that dead faint! And Tom's face—*that* had been a picture, too! Janet said he looked as if *he* were going to faint as well, and a nice business *that* would have been! Who could have helped up *the two* of them? Batty said this was a conundrum, and that she had better ask him another; but any little attempt at lightness of heart that they *tried* to put on rang very false, and moment by moment their embarrassment seemed to grow greater.

Finally, as might have been foreseen, Mrs. Egerton—dear, good-hearted woman—is made the scapegoat, and in fear and trembling at last consents to go downstairs (one step at a time) and interview the stricken young man, who is popularly supposed to be still waiting for news of Vincent in the library.

“But when she gets there
The lib'ry is bare,”

to misquote an older and better story, and no young man, good or bad, is to be seen.

Mrs. Egerton, who has still many youthful moments, picks up her skirts and rushes upstairs again.

“But wasn't even *Tom* there?” ask the anxious

people above, who are, perhaps, the least little bit in the world disappointed at this unexpected *dénouement*. They had been looking forward to very different and far more exciting news.

"No, not even Tom," said Mrs. Egerton, thankfully. She felt at this momentous hour that it would have been even a more awful task to face Tom than his distinctly ill-used brother.

* * * * *

Cedric, when he heard that first glad mention of his name, the gladness of which had nothing to do with *him*, had looked quickly, first at Vincent, and then at his brother. *Both* faces had been a revelation to him! And when, a second later, the girl he had for so many weeks regarded as his future wife, lay fainting in his brother's arms, the whole truth lay bare to him.

Without another glance at either of them, and under cover of the confusion that ensued, he slipped out of the room and out of the house, and, with a haste of which he himself was unaware, back to his own place, where he now (it is an hour later) shuts himself up in his own room, turning the key in the door with a feverish energy.

A sense of loneliness overpowers him as he sinks into a chair. A sense of *want*. He knows now, as well as if all the world cried it aloud to him, that Vincent no longer loves him! that she had never loved him! That through the

extraordinary instinct of the blind, she had *felt* a difference between his brother's voice and his, though hardly any human thing *with* sight could distinguish one intonation from the other.

He tries to reason it away; to tell himself that when she sees him again, when all is explained, things will be as they were yesterday—(how long ago yesterday seems!)—but some inward force compels him to give up this thought. No; it is Tom she loves! And Tom—— Once again his brother's face rises before him as it was when Vincent had fallen fainting into his arms, and he *knows* that Tom loves her!

Up and down, up and down the room he goes, his heart in a turmoil. Anger, disappointment, he feels; but surely there ought to be something *more*!

What is his strongest feeling? He has lost her. Yes! that is beyond all doubt. He does not for a moment blind himself to *that*. But *with* that knowledge should there not be some other, deeper, emotion than anger? And if—if—he had *really* loved her, would he have been so clear-eyed all at once?

This comes to him like a shock. What had his love meant?—protection, pity. Pity, truly, is akin to love; but *is* it love? Does much of this loneliness from which he is now suffering spring from the knowledge that he no longer *loves her*?

Oh, no! impossible. Getting up, he paces the room again, fighting with himself as he goes. He tears his heart to pieces as he walks rapidly to and fro; but the fact, the cold, wretched fact, remains. . . . He no longer loves her.

It is terrible! His poor, pretty girl! That is how he calls her to himself now in his abasement. It is, perhaps, a pity that he had not called her so to *her* during all these past weeks. His knowledge that his love has been so poor a thing—that it has lived so short a life—humiliates him. It had been built solely, as it seems now, on his longing to protect her—to shelter her against the blasts of adversity. Now that she no longer requires that protection, he no longer requires her! Some charm that she had for him has snapped in two; some virtue has gone out of her. In her weakness lay her strength, so far as he was concerned; but with that weakness gone, his chivalrous thoughts towards her must go, too.

His past, so far as she is concerned, lies dead. She is gone from him for ever. He knows now the real meaning of the repugnance he had felt when they told him that her eyes *might* be restored to her.

* * * * *

In the meantime Tom had gone half mad; he had not seen Cedric's abrupt departure, and when he found Vincent was not dead—as he

half feared for the moment—but only unconscious, had looked round for his brother. To find him gone! This struck a sinister note in his thoughts, and, indeed, brought him to a full knowledge of how things were likely to stand in the future between him and Cedric. He waited a little while to hear how Vincent was getting on, and, being satisfied as to her state, had run all the way homewards with a heart on fire.

To explain matters to Cedric was his one thought. But how? What *was* there to explain? What words were there that could possibly tone down the truth?

Could he tell Cedric that he honestly believed it was all a “mere mistake”? He had called it so to Vincent; and though undoubtedly a mistake had been made, there was still something beneath it that was *no* mistake, but most fatally real. Was it possible for him, then, to tell Cedric that after all it might be that Vincent loved him, and him only? Tom knew that he could not tell him that; but he could at all events *compel* Cedric to believe that both he and Vincent were innocent in the matter, and that this terrible thing had come to them with a shock as great as even *he* had received. Vincent had never seen either of them until that luckless moment, but when she glanced from one face to the other, she—— Tom’s thoughts stopped there; he refused to let them go on; but in spite of his

remorse he could not suppress a wild glow of passionate joy and delight. He knew, though he refused to let himself dwell upon it, that Vincent had made her choice not now, but long ago, and that it was *he* whom she had always loved, in some strange, unacknowledged way, not Cedric.

Reaching home, he went straight to Cedric's private den, only to find the door locked, and to be told by a servant that he would see no one.

"He gave orders, sir, that even *you* were to be denied."

Tom turned away, the servant's kindly meant emphasis on the "*you*" sounding satirically in his ears. Was it not to bar him out that those doors were locked?

CHAPTER XXXI.

“ But now my grief,
Like festering wounds grown cold, begins to smart;
The raging gnaws and tears my heart.”

“ Yes, she will see you,” says Mrs. Egerton, gently. “ But you must remember all she has gone through. Even now, although it is a week since—since——” Mrs. Egerton hesitates and colours, and Tom Brande says,—

“ Yes, I know,” gloomily.

“ Even now she is very nervous, very unstrung. I think it was a pity she refused to see your brother. But, as you know, she was most obstinate about it, and went into quite a passion of tears when we urged her. The Squire himself would not hear of her being further persuaded. Still, for all that, she insists on considering herself engaged to your brother. He has gone away ?”

“ Yes,” says Tom, who, in spite of himself, is looking very like a culprit.

“ You don’t know when he will be back ?”

“ I don’t even know where he is,” with increasing gloom.

"Tom," says Mrs. Egerton suddenly, after a rather painful silence, "there is no use in disguising the fact. It is *you* she loves."

"Why should she love either of us?"

Mrs. Egerton looks at him. "I don't call that," says she, "a very ingenuous answer."

"You are right," says Tom suddenly, vehemently. "I know, I *feel* that she loves me; but believe *this*, Mrs. Egerton," with a touch of anxious passion, "she does not, she *could* not, love me one-half as much as I love her!"

There is a little silence.

"It is very unfortunate," says Mrs. Egerton, presently, with a sigh. "If, when she first looked at you both, she had preferred Cedric's face to yours, how much better it would have been——"

"*Better!*" Tom's tone almost makes her jump. He flings out his arm with an angry gesture of dissent; then, recollecting himself, colours hotly. "For Cedric, not for me," says he, in a low tone.

"I was about to say for *all* of us," says Mrs. Egerton. "I cannot help thinking that we, her own people, are entirely to blame. We should have described Cedric to her, and you, too. It would have been a guide."

"No doubt. But to what end?" says Tom. "Cedric would never have made her happy."

"And you?" questions Mrs. Egerton, with a faint smile.

"There is small use in talking of that now," says Tom, very sadly. "A sense of honour, you say, holds her bound to my brother, and for that I honour *her*. But," he gets up and goes to the window, "if things had been different; if I might have spoken, and she might have heard, I think, loving her as I do with all my heart, I *could* have made her happy." He turns abruptly. "Of course, if Cedric—— But I cannot understand him."

"No, no! None of us can. And we must not think about that——" Seeing the change on his face, she adds hastily and with her usual innate sweetness, "Just *yet*. But a word, dear Tom. There is another thing I must mention before you meet her. The poor child is covered with shame at having shown so publicly such an open preference for you, who had shown none for her! Oh, yes, yes! *I* know your secret. I guessed it long ago; and, indeed, I have whispered a word or two to her to comfort her—but you see nobody else knows it, and she is miserable about it. What a strange thing it all is, Tom! If she had had her sight, it would have been *you* she would have chosen before all the world. I am sure of that. And when her sight *does* come to her, her instincts drew her to you. It was a terrible ordeal for the poor child, and she has suffered greatly since."

"You say," says Tom, in a low tone, "that

you have told her that I love her—have loved her all along.”

“Yes. I thought it better to do so. But,” slowly, “it will make no difference to her.”

“I know that. My brother stands between us. Even if she should *ever* learn to really care for me, that first glance she gave me meant nothing. She thought I was Cedric.”

Mrs. Egerton hesitates. She knows perfectly that Vincent, for good and all, in that one first glance had given her heart to Tom for ever; but is it wise to say so? She grows diplomatic, and conceals the want of an answer in a heavy sigh.

“She *certainly* thought I was Cedric.”

“Yes, yes, of *course*,” hastily; and then with even greater haste, “It is only to-day she has consented to see you.”

“*Let* me see her then,” exclaims he, rising eagerly.

“You must remember,” says Mrs. Egerton, anxiously and meaningly, “that if your brother were at home, she would probably by now have consented to see *him* too.”

“Do you think I want to be warned?” says he.

“She is in the old school-room.” Mrs. Egerton had again found herself without an answer. “You will be quiet? You will not distress her? I warn you, I shall come for you in fifteen minutes; and, besides,——” But Tom is gone.

* * * * *

Pale and dejected, with still some slight bandages across her eyes, he finds her. In this room—this old school-room—this old friend dear to the hearts of the girls, she had taken refuge, and the blinds being drawn and the curtains, it lies in semi-darkness. As yet no strong glow must be allowed her.

Rising nervously, she stands still, clutching the arm of her chair.

"I have come, Vincent," says the young man in the saddest voice in the world. "You will not welcome me; but I felt," with a touch of passion that goes to her troubled heart and reassures it, "that I *must* see you."

She is trembling excessively now, and taking her hand he presses her back into the chair from which she has just risen.

"It was terrible!" says she, in a whisper fraught with poignant memory.

"It was *truth*," returns he, quickly. "From the first moment I saw you I loved you; perhaps you knew that, and, when your eyes were opened, it drew you to me. But you must not dwell on that. Your coming to me *then* doesn't mean that you ever gave even one thought to me! Why then should you fret over this thing, and call it terrible?"

There is a little silence. Almost unconsciously the girl is aware of a sense of relief. It *is* true, then, what Auntie had said, that he loves her—

loves her only. It lifts, indeed, the cloud of shame that has clung round her for so many days, ever since she waked from that long faint to remember how she had run unasked to him, with literally open arms. Such innocent, such tender arms!

"Ah! let me look at you," says she, suddenly. She pulls off the bandages (somewhat to his horror and fear, but also to his delight, for now he can again see her lovely face) and regards him with eager, nervous eyes. "Yes. It is you!" says she, naïvely. Her face is a mixture of grief and exquisite happiness.

There is a pause, and then,—

"Too late you know me," says he, bitterly. "But I will not have you dwell upon that first *real* meeting between us with pain of any sort. I love you, Vincent. I have loved you always——" A sob in his throat stays him.

He is standing by the mantel-piece, and now he turns aside and lays his head upon his arm. Presently he feels a light touch—the softest, the *dearest*—on his hair.

"Why didn't you say it before?" asks she.

Simply and very sweetly, yet with unspeakable tenderness, she asks her pathetic question. Not for a moment does she doubt what he has said,—that from the first moment of their meeting he had loved her. There was with her only an intolerable regret that he had remained silent so long.

"How could I know," says he, "that you would ever *think* of me?" There is such humility in his tone as goes to her heart. "And afterwards, when Cedric—— How could I dare to hope you might prefer me to *him*! He is a saint; the most perfect man I ever met in my life. Who was I that I should put myself in comparison with *him*?"

"I don't know," says she, sadly. "But you— were you, and that was all!"

All, indeed!

Suddenly he falls upon his knees before her. He has for the moment forgotten his brother, everything. "Vincent, how is it to be now?" demands he, with all the imperial sweetness of a lover's tone.

"Oh, you know, you know," says she. Her slender fingers push him from her; she rises to her feet. And her voice!—*Is* it her voice? It is changed, certainly, so grief-laden, yet so strong that he scarcely recognizes it. "I am bound to your brother; I have given *him* my promise. Do you think I could forget how good he was to me, a poor blind girl, whom others——"

"Don't talk like that!" breaks in Tom, violently. "Good to you because he loved you. *You*! Who wouldn't love you? Why, if it comes to that, you are ten times more bound to *me*, because I love you ten thousand times more than ever he did or *could*."

All in a moment sense returns to him, and with it a knowledge of everlasting dishonour. He had belied his brother's love to her; he had laid bare his own love to her; he had——

She has covered her eyes with her hands.

"Vincent," says he.

"*Oh!*" She makes a little gesture, and then suddenly bursts into bitter weeping. A sickening sense of fear overpowers him.

"*Don't* do that!" entreats he, wildly. "*Don't cry*, whatever you do. Think of your sight, only just restored. If—if *I* should be the one to undo all that,—to send you back to darkness again! Vincent," as her sobs continue, "have pity on me, if not upon yourself. Forgive me. Do not be angry with me."

"Oh, I know," says she, trying to choke back her tears. "But I can't help it. You can see how it is. And why should I be angry with you? And what have I got to forgive? It is only that—I am bound to—*him*—in honour."

It is such a sweet, such an open, yet such an unintentional admission, that Tom's heart seems to stop beating, and his love for her, already so great, grows, if possible, deeper.

"So am *I* bound to him," says he, in a strangled tone. "Oh, Vincent," catching her hands and pressing them against his heart, "what a miserable world this is!"

"No, no. Not *now*," says she, in the sweetest, faintest whisper. Somehow he knows, being her true lover, that it is not the opening of her eyes, but his love for her, however hopeless, that has made the world so sweet.

* * * * *

He has hardly left her, when Madge creeps into the room.

"Well, darling," says she. And then, "Your bandages off? Is that wise? But"—with a sharp delight in her sister's recovery—"you can see me plainly,—*quite* plainly?"

"Yes," faintly.

"You," naively, "saw *him* too, plainly, quite plainly?"

"Yes," paling.

"And——"

"Oh, Madge, *why* go into it like this?" cries Vincent, with a sudden touch of uncontrollable anguish. "There is nothing, there *can* be nothing between us for ever! I have told his brother that—that I would marry *him*."

"But if you love Tom?"

"Still, there is my promise."

"Oh, what nonsense!" cries Madge, who really doesn't seem to have any principles to speak of. "Are you going to make Tom and yourself and Cedric unhappy, because of a promise you gave when you could not even *see*?"

"Cedric!"

"Certainly Cedric. Why, *he* is bound to be the unhappiest of all."

"No, no. That will be in my hands, and—I won't listen to your sophistry, Madge. I *know* I am doing right. Could I face life again, having been false to the promise I gave him, who had been so kind, so sweet, so good to me in every way when I was so stricken? It was an unfortunate promise," says she, sadly, "but of the kind that, once given, cannot be revoked."

"All I can say is," declares Madge, "that if I had promised ten times over to marry some one before Victor asked *me*, I'd have sent all my promises to the winds and married *him*."

"It is all so different," says Vincent, sighing. "*I* was blind, and he pitied me. *No* one could pity you! Is not gratitude a strong bond? I shall be true to my word, Madge, until he himself tells me he no longer wishes me to keep to it."



CHAPTER XXXII.

“Trembling lips,
Turned to such grief that they say bright words sadly.”

SAD and disheartened, Tom plunges on his way home through the dripping woods. Some heavy showers had fallen of late, and the leafless branches now drop mournfully upon his head. Nature to-day is scarcely less desolate than his own thoughts, and so lost, indeed, is he in his melancholy reflections that it is by a severe effort only he brings himself back to the present and the voice of one of the grooms from the Elms.

“Beg pardon, sir. But the master came home an hour ago, and he sent me to find you!” Tom stands staring at Brown, who is quite an old friend, as if he had never seen him before. So Cedric has come home, then, and wants to see him.

“Go back and say that I am coming,” says he.

And, indeed, scarcely another quarter of an hour elapses before he reaches the house, and is ushered into Cedric’s sanctum.

For a full minute the two brothers stand face to face without a word being uttered between them. Then, the tension growing intolerable, Tom breaks out,—

"You sent for me?"

"Yes. I want to learn the truth; to know how it has been with you all these past weeks—all these weeks, counting from the day when we both saw Vincent for the first time!"

"With me?" It is impossible to misunderstand the question that Cedric is asking, standing there on the hearth-rug, with his strange mystical eyes bent on his brother's. Fight against their influence as hard as he can, Tom is not proof against it, and now he knows he is standing in some sort of sense guilty before his brother. His eyes sink to the ground.

"Yes, all these past weeks," repeats Cedric. He pauses. "All that time you loved her? Is that true?"

To Tom it seems as though he is standing over him like a condemning judge. He bows his head. Is he going to reproach him? to cast him out for ever?

All at once he feels a hand upon his shoulder.

"Tom, be frank with me. Let us see this thing out together; let us get at the root of it," says Cedric, gently, yet with a touch of sternness new to him. "You *do* love her."

"I have told you," says Tom, huskily.

"For how long?"

"I have told you that, too!—Ever since I first saw her!"

Cedric stands back.

"I wish you had told me sooner," says he, heavily.

"How could I?" cries Tom, breaking out almost fiercely. "You had spoken. She had accepted you. It was *you* she—she seemed to—to——" he falters.

"No, don't say it! It was *you* she loved," says Cedric, coldly.

"You must be mad to talk like that," begins Tom, but his brother checks him.

"It is now I am sane," says he. "It is now only the truth is clear to me. Through all, even though our voices are so fatally alike, it was *you* she loved. When she saw you——" He stops. There is an eloquent silence, and then, "You have seen her?"

"To-day for the first time since——"

"And she?"

"What am I to answer? What am I to say?" exclaims Tom, in an anguished tone. "And after all, how can she *know*? How can she be *sure*? Are we not both strangers to her?"

"She knew!" says Cedric, as if finally. He sighs. "Well, it is all over," says he.

Tom's heart is conscious of a violent throb of joy. What do his words imply? Is it renunciation? . . . Then all at once a sense of shame overpowers him.

"How do you mean?" stammers he. But

Cedric, who has begun to pace up and down the room, does not hear him.

"Yes, it is all over!" says he again. "She would never, perhaps, have really cared for me, even had she remained sightless, and now—what could I do for her now? I thought to protect her; but now she needs no protection, and even if she did, it is to you she would turn for it."

In spite of the gentleness of his manner, a little tinge of bitterness runs through his tone, and Tom, as if unable to bear it, turns away and covers his face with his hands. In a moment Cedric is beside him.

"Look here, Tom, old fellow, you must not fret about it," says he, quickly. "It is all for the best, believe me."

"The best for *me*!" says Tom. "But for you——"

"For me, too. I shall now," a great light springs into his eyes, "I shall now be free to undertake the work I have longed for all my life."

"The work?" Tom faces him.

"I mean to take orders and go abroad as a missionary."

There is something so spiritual, so full of calm joy, in his whole air that Tom is silenced for the moment. And now, when he *would* have spoken, Cedric, as though he has read his thoughts, stops him.

"You think it is a sacrifice," says he, smiling. "Put that out of your head at once. It is the dream of my life. I confess that for a while *another* dream pushed it out of sight, but I know now that this is the real one. You were right, Tom, when you said once—do you remember?—that I did not know what love meant. The earthly love. The other——" He pauses, and Tom, with all the old affection for his brother surging up again in his heart, comes to him and lays his hands upon his shoulders.

"The other—the *higher!*" says he, in a low tone, "is—*yours!*"

Cedric makes a gesture of dissent, and a rather pained expression on his face warns Tom to pursue the subject no further. Praise or admiration of any sort to Cedric, whose mind has always run on ascetic lines, means misery, and after that penitence and prayer. If he had been born in the mediæval ages, he would certainly have been canonized and held up to all time as a roseate specimen of a monk, as saintly as he was beautiful.

Being born, however, in more material days, he now most unselfishly begins to think of Tom's material interests.

"As to her future and yours, Tom, I have thought out that. I think it was for that I went away. To think of it, I mean. I shall speak to Mr. Grace. I shall make it all right with him.

This property—I sha'n't want it. You may call it yours from this day."

All the coals of fire he has ever heard of seem to be descending on Tom's head.

"Cedric! once for all," says he, passionately, "I won't hear of *that*. Am I to rob you of the woman you—you love,—for you *do* love her in your own way, in spite of all you have said—and of your money, too? No, I shall never consent to that."

"Then the Squire will not consent, either," with a whimsical smile. "The loaves and fishes, as you know, are very dear to him. And consider, dear fellow! As I shall never marry, you may as well have a little before your time (when I can enjoy your enjoyment of it) some of *what must* come to you later; I sha'n't want it.

"You forget your work," says Tom, gravely.

"Not I. I shall keep for that over and above what I shall want. There are those investments, you know, and other things. And after all, what *is* my work, Tom? Is not part of it to make happy the two people I love best in the world. 'Charity,' as the old Scotch proverb has it, 'begins at home,' though, as it very wisely goes on to say, 'should na end there.' I agree with it. Come, I shall go up to 'The Court' this moment and make it all right with the Squire."

* * * * *

And he was as good as his word. He *did*

make it "all right with the Squire." So right, indeed, that when Tom arrived at "The Court" two days afterwards, a little uncertain and considerably depressed, he found himself received with open arms,—arms, however, into which, metaphorically or otherwise, he declined to throw himself. The thought of Cedric's surrender—his sacrifice—was still making his heart sore, and yet, to refuse the sacrifice, he knew would be useless, as the love Cedric bore Vincent would be insufficient for her, and, besides, she did not love *him*. Cedric had written her the kindest, tenderest letter, resigning all claim to her. It breathed of perfect affection, yet there was something in it that told the girl—into whose heart a first touch of passion had just entered—that he had not in reality loved her as poor mortals would be loved. It was balm to her heart, that had been reproaching her, villifying her, for what she had insisted on calling her treachery to him. And it was balm to Tom as well, though it was many days before he either heard of it or read it.

CHAPTER XXXIIL

"What do you think of marriage?"

"Hail, love! first love, thou word that sums all bliss!"

"AND so everyone is going to be married," says the Squire, disgustedly, to Mrs. Egerton, Batty, and Janet; presumably the last two, but they are not listening to him. Mrs. Egerton is, whilst winding up a huge ball of wool intended for mufflers for the poor around her during the coming cold season. Mrs. Egerton is great on mufflers.

"Oh, not everyone! Vincent and Tom, of course! By-the-bye, he has just arrived, you know, and is going to see her for the first time since poor Cedric withdrew his claim. Very honourable of him to stay so long away, wasn't it? But I always thought dear Tom *charming*! So sad for poor Cedric, but so very *wise* of him, as she certainly never would have cared for him. Well, what were we talking of? Oh, yes! Not everyone, my dear John. Vincent and Tom, and Madge and dear Victor. That's all."

"Dear Tom and dear Victor!" petulantly.
"How *dear* they are! And how many more

would you have? That's *all*, indeed! I wonder you don't suggest that baby Janet—and Batty."

"Janet—Batty!" murmurs Mrs. Egerton, as if thinking out something. She is a born matchmaker, and can't help it. Matchmakers are much to be envied, in spite of all that is said against them. Their lives are full of excitement.

"Or William Eyre," continues the Squire, who has taken no notice of her pause.

"William?" She is silent again for a moment, and the Squire fails to notice how she stops at Colonel Eyre's Christian name. "Well—why not?" says she, quite suddenly. Then all at once, as if horrified at her own tone, that has been, perhaps, a little decided, she colours violently, and begins to wind up her wool with an immense accession of vigour.

"'Why not?' What d'ye mean, Henrietta?"

"Nothing—nothing."

"Pshaw! as if I couldn't see through you women. There is something,—and what's the matter with you?—eh? Your face is as red as that wool. Come, out with it. What's this about Eyre. What's that idiot going to do?"

"Really, John," with excessive dignity, "I fail to see where the word idiot comes in."

"Do you? All you women think every man an angel."

"Not *every* man!" says Mrs. Egerton, now pre-

paring to remove herself and her wool from the room. "For example, I am sure, John, I have never thought of *you* as one!"

"Happy to hear it," snarls the Squire. "But, I say, Henrietta,—stop! Where are you going? Don't go yet. You haven't told me, you know,"—the Squire is a confirmed gossip,—“you haven't told me about Eyre. What's he going to do, eh? Not going to *marry* anyway, I hope."

"*His* hope is very far removed from yours at that rate," says Mrs. Egerton, pausing reluctantly on her way to the door. "Because he intends to marry almost immediately."

"What!" roars the Squire. "Eyre going to be married! A confirmed bachelor, as he has been calling himself for years! Come *back*, Henrietta," as she once more and with increased speed makes for the door, "come back, I say. What old fool is going to marry *him*?"

This really is *too* much! Mrs. Egerton turns round, her face a thing of wrath.

"*I* am that old fool!" says she, with a glance that freezes him to his very heart's core.

He sees her disappear through the doorway, and in a flash he feels how terrible his life will be without her. No one can manage the cook (a fiery Irishwoman, if an incomparable *chef*) but Mrs. Egerton. His favourite soups, therefore; his little soufflés, the occasional ragoûts in which

his soul delights,—all—all will go with Henrietta.

“Good gracious! if *she* marries, what’s going to become of me?” says he, speaking out loud in the extremity of his despair. Suddenly it has come home to him that women are of *some* importance, after all.

“Why, you’ll have me, papa,” says Janet, tripping forward.

“Goodness protect me!” groans the Squire.

“Jane, you forget!” says Batty austere, who has followed her, and is now regarding her with a threatening eye. “You have promised to accept my mother’s invitation to return with me to Ireland, there to ‘view the landscape o’er,’ with another view in prospect that need not be looked into now.”

“Oh, don’t be stupid!” says Janet, lifting an ungrateful shoulder against him. “Of course I know what you mean. You are always harping on that one *silly* subject. But,” promptly and with considerable disdain turning her back upon him, “who on earth would marry *you*?”

“Why, you!” retorts Mr. O’Grady, totally undamped. “When you come to——”

“My senses, perhaps?” wrathfully.

“Oh, no! Really, you know, I wasn’t going to say that.” There is a suspicious embarrassment in Mr. O’Grady’s air. “One can *think* things, but to *say* them—— No, no, far be it from me!

Your senses! . . . You oughtn't to be so hard upon yourself, my dear girl. What I was going to say was, that when you come to *years of discretion*, you——”

But the rest is lost in the din of the battle royal that ensues.

* * * * *

But here, in this dimly-lighted room, no sound of wordy war may be heard; nor does there come any faintest echo from the world outside to kill the tender silence of the growing evening.

As he opens the door softly and comes in, she rises, and holds out to him her small, white, trembling hands.

“Oh, Tom!—*oh*, Tom! To think that after all——”

He falls on his knees before her.

“My beloved! my darling!” whispers he. “It seems *too much* happiness!”

THE END.

Authors and Their Works.

ROSA N. CAREY.

The Old, Old Story.

But Men Must Work.

Sir Godfrey's Granddaughters.

Mary St. John.

Heriot's Choice.

12mo. Paper, 50 cents; cloth, \$1.00.

The Search for Basil Lyndhurst.

Wooded and Married.

Barbara Heathcote's Trial.

Not Like Other Girls.

Robert Ord's Atonement.

Wee Wifie.

Uncle Max.

Nellie's Memories.

Queenie's Whim.

For Lillas.

Only the Governess.

Bound only in cloth, \$1.00.

"Miss Rosa Nouchette Carey has achieved an enviable reputation as a writer of tales of a restful and quiet kind. They tell pleasant stories of agreeable people, are never sensational, and have a genuine moral purpose and helpful tone, without being aggressively didactic or distinctly religious in character."—*N. Y. Christian Union.*

STORIES FOR GIRLS.

Little Miss Muffet.

12mo. Cloth, illustrated, \$1.25.

Aunt Diana.

Merle's Crusade.

Esther.

Our Bessie.

Averil.

12mo. Cloth, \$1.25 per volume.

Five volumes, uniform binding, in neat box, \$6.25.

J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia.

"THE DUCHESS."

Lady Patty. **Peter's Wife.** **A Little Irish Girl.**
The Hoyden.

12mo. Paper, 50 cents; cloth, \$1.00.

Phyllis.	Mrs. Geoffrey.
Molly Bawn.	Portia.
Airy Fairy Lillian.	Löys, Lord Berresford, and
Beauty's Daughters.	other Stories.
Faith and Unfaith.	Rossmoyne.
Doris.	A Mental Struggle.
"O Tender Dolores."	Lady Valworth's Diamonds.
A Maiden All Forlorn.	Lady Branksmere.
In Durance Vile.	A Modern Circe.
The Duchess.	The Honourable Mrs. Vere-
Marvel.	ker.
Jerry, and other Stories.	Under-Currents.
A Life's Remorse.	

Bound only in Cloth, \$1.00.

"'The Duchess' has well deserved the title of being one of the most fascinating novelists of the day. The stories written by her are the airiest, lightest, and brightest imaginable; full of wit, spirit, and gayety, yet containing touches of the most exquisite pathos. There is something good in all of them."—*London Academy.*

J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia.



Mrs. George McClellan.

(HARFORD FLEMMING.)

Broken Chords.

12mo. Paper, 50 cents; cloth, \$1.25.

"The story is developed with so subtle a skill that it is difficult to give an adequate resume of it in a brief space. It is sufficient to say, however, that it will arrest the attention of the two most numerous classes of readers,—the fiction-loving and the ethical."
—*Boston Advertiser.*

Broken Chords.

Cupid and the Sphinx.

A Carpet Knight.

12mo. Cloth, gilt top, three volumes in neat box, \$3.00.

"In response to a persistent demand for the novels of Mrs. George McClellan ('Harford Fleming'), it has been decided to republish her works in a library edition, bound in an attractive uniform of dark blue, with decoration of white panelling. 'Cupid and the Sphinx,' a charming novel of life in Egypt, was first suggested by a statue which Mrs. McClellan observed in Mr. Story's studio at Rome. Mrs. McClellan comes of a gifted family, and her habit of careful observation and exact description is as evident in the control of her characters and plot as in the purely descriptive passages.

"These traits reappear in 'The Carpet Knight,' a Philadelphia society story displaying clever delineation of types and keen analysis of character, and in 'Broken Chords,' a glimpse of real life and tenderly human romance."—*Philadelphia Ledger.*

J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia.

MARIE CORELLI.

Barabbas.

A Dream of the World's Tragedy.

12mo. Cloth, \$1.00.

"A book which aroused in some quarters more violent hostility than any book of recent years. By most secular critics the authoress was accused of bad taste, bad art, and gross blasphemy; but, in curious contrast, most of the religious papers acknowledged the reverence of treatment and the dignity of conception which characterized the work."—*London Athenæum*.

"It is a remarkable story in many ways, bold yet reverent in its handling of the great and solemn facts of the trial, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, striking in its fresh and sympathetic representations of Judas, Barabbas, and others, uplifting in its tender and beautiful conception of Christ, and brilliant in its descriptions."—*Boston Congregationalist*.

Vendetta;

Or, The Story of One Forgotten.

12mo. Cloth, \$1.00.

"It is a thrilling and irresistibly charming book."—*Baltimore American*.

"The story is Italian, the time 1884, and the precise stage of the acts, Naples, during the last visitation of the cholera. A romance, but a romance of reality. No mind of man can imagine incidents so wonderful, so amazing as those of actual occurrence. While the story is exciting, and must be read through when once begun, it furnishes a vivid and impressive picture of Italian life and morals."—*Washington National Republican*.

J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia.



Captain Charles King, U.S.A.

Under Fire. *Illustrated. Cloth, \$1.25.*

The Colonel's Daughter. *Illustrated. Cloth, \$1.25.*

Marian's Faith. *Illustrated. Cloth, \$1.25.*

Captain Blake. *Illustrated. Cloth, \$1.25.*

Foes in Ambush. *Cloth, \$1.25.*

Kitty's Conquest. *Cloth, \$1.00.*

Starlight Ranch, and Other Stories. *Cloth, \$1.00.*

Laramie; or, The Queen of Bedlam. *Cloth, \$1.00.*

The Deserter, and From the Ranks. *Cloth, \$1.00.*

Two Soldiers, and Dunraven Ranch. *Cloth, \$1.00.*

A Soldier's Secret, and An Army Portia. *Cloth, \$1.00.*

Waring's Peril. *Cloth, \$1.00.*

Trials of a Staff Officer. *Cloth, \$1.00.*

EDITOR OF

The Colonel's Christmas Dinner, and Other Stories.
Cloth, \$1.25.

An Initial Experience, and Other Stories. *Cloth, \$1.00;*
Paper, 50 cents.

Captain Dreams, and Other Stories. *Cloth, \$1.00; Paper,*
50 cents.

From the lowest soldier to the highest officer, from the servant to the master, there is not a character in any of Captain King's novels that is not wholly in keeping with expressed sentiments. There is not a movement made on the field, not a break from the ranks, not an offence against the military code of discipline, and hardly a heart-beat that escapes his watchfulness."—*Boston Herald.*

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY, PHILADELPHIA.

JULIEN GORDON.

"Now and then, to prove to men—perhaps also to prove to themselves—what they can do if they dare and will, one of these gifted women detaches herself from her sisters, enters the arena with men, to fight for the highest prizes, and as the brave Goltz says of Brother Martin, 'shames many a knight.' To this race of conquerors belongs to-day one of the first living writers of novels and romances, Julien Gordon."

FRIEDRICH SPIELHAGEN.

Poppæa.

A Diplomat's Diary.

A Successful Man.

Vampires, and Mademoiselle Réséda.

Two stories in one book.

12mo. Cloth, \$1.00 per vol.

"The cleverness and lightness of touch which characterized 'A Diplomat's Diary' are not wanting in the later work of the American lady who writes under the pseudonyme of Julien Gordon. In her former story the dialogue is pointed and alert, the characters are clear-cut and distinct, and the descriptions picturesque. As for the main idea of 'A Successful Man,' the intersection of two wholly different strata of American life,—one fast and fashionable, the other domestic and decorous,—it is worked out with much skill and alertness of treatment to its inevitably tragic issue."—N. Y. World.

J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia.

Authors and Their Works.

Mrs. H. Lovett Cameron.

A Tragic Blunder.

A Daughter's Heart.

A Sister's Sin.

Jack's Secret.

12mo. Paper, 50 cents; cloth, \$1.00.

"Mrs. Cameron's novels, 'In a Grass Country,' 'A Daughter's Heart,' 'A Sister's Sin,' 'Jack's Secret,' have shown a high skill in inventing interesting plots and delineating character. All her stories are vivid in action and pure in tone. This one, 'A Tragic Blunder,' is equal to her best."—*National Tribune.*

This Wicked World.

In a Grass Country.

A Devout Lover.

Vera Neville.

A Life's Mistake.

Pure Gold.

Worth Winning.

The Cost of a Lie.

A Lost Wife.

Cloth, \$1.00.

"The works of this author are always pure in character, and can be safely put into the hands of young as well as old."—*Norristown Herald.*

"A wide circle of admirers always welcome a new work by this favorite author. Her style is pure and interesting, and she depicts marvellously well the daily social life of the English people."—*St. Louis Republic.*

J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia.

MRS. A. L. WISTER.

Translations from the German.

\$1.00 per volume.

Countess Erika's Apprenticeship. By Ossip Schubin.

"O Thou, My Austria!" By Ossip Schubin.

Erlach Court. By Ossip Schubin.

The Alpine Fay. By E. Werner.

The Owl's Nest. By E. Marlitt.



Picked Up in the Streets. By H. Schobert.

Saint Michael. By E. Werner.

Violetta. By Ursula Zoge von Manteufel.

The Lady with the Rubles. By E. Marlitt.

Vain Forebodings. By E. Oswald.

A Penniless Girl. By W. Heimbürg.

Quicksands. By Adolph Streckfuss.

Countess Gisele. By E. Marlitt.



At the Councillor's. By E. Marlitt.

The Second Wife. By E. Marlitt.

The Old Mam'selle's Secret. By E. Marlitt.

Gold Elsie. By E. Marlitt.

The Little Moorland Princess. By E. Marlitt.

Banned and Blessed. By E. Werner.

A Noble Name. By Claire von Glümer.



MRS. WISTER'S TRANSLATIONS.

Continued.

From Hand to Hand. By Golo Raimund.

Severa. By E. Hartner.

A New Race. By Golo Raimund.

The Eichhofs. By Moritz von Reichenbach.

Castle Hohenwald. By Adolph Streckfuss.

Margarethe. By E. Juncker.



Too Rich. By Adolph Streckfuss.

A Family Feud. By Ludwig Harder.

The Green Gate. By Ernst Wichert.

Only a Girl. By Wilhelmine von Hillern.

Why Did He Not Die. By Ad. von Volckhauser.

Hulda. By Fanny Lewald.

The Bailiff's Maid. By E. Marlitt.

In the Schillingscourt. By E. Marlitt.

"Mrs. A. L. Wister, through her many translations of novels from the German, has established a reputation of the highest order for literary judgment, and for a long time her name upon the title-page of such a translation has been a sufficient guarantee to the lovers of fiction of a pure and elevating character, that the novel would be a cherished home favorite. This faith in Mrs. Wister is fully justified by the fact that among her more than thirty translations that have been published by Lippincott's there has not been a single disappointment. And to the exquisite judgment of selection is to be added the rare excellence of her translations, which has commanded the admiration of literary and linguistic scholars."
—*Boston Home Journal*.

J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia.

THE GIRL'S OWN IN-DOOR BOOK.



Containing Practical Help
to Girls on all matters
relating to their Mate-
rial Comfort and Well-
Being.

EDITED BY
CHARLES PETERS.

With over 150 Illustra-
tions. 548 Pages.
Square 12mo.
Cloth extra, \$1.75.

"No more welcome present for a girl just getting into her teens could be found than this fine, well-filled volume,—a perfect storehouse of information and amusement. It tells how to do everything a girl would like to do, and to do it well, from tatting to playing the violin or organ."—*St. Louis Republic*.

THE GIRL'S OWN OUT-DOOR BOOK.

Edited by CHARLES PETERS, Editor of "The Girl's Own In-Door Book." 180 Illustrations. 510 Pages. Square 12mo. Cloth extra, \$1.75.

Contents :—GIRLHOOD—OUT-DOOR RECREATIONS—THE SEA-SIDE—OUR SUMMER HOLIDAYS—HOLIDAY NEEDLE-WORK—SOCIAL AMUSEMENTS—ETIQUETTE—TRAVELLING—SHOPPING AND MARKETING—THE GARDENER—FOWL REARING—THE BOTANIST—THE ORNITHOLOGIST—KNICK-KNACKS MADE FROM NATURAL OBJECTS—PHOTOGRAPHY—ASTRONOMY—OUT-DOOR MUSIC—CHRISTIAN WORK.

"All that the work contains is set forth with refinement, taste, and good sense."—*New York Tribune*.

For sale by all Booksellers. Sent by the Publishers, post-paid, on receipt of the price. J. B. Lippincott Company, 715 and 717 Market Street, Philadelphia.

MAID MARIAN AND ROBIN HOOD.

By J. E. MUDDOCK. With 12 Illustrations by STANLEY L. WOOD. 12mo. Cloth, extra, \$1.50.

This is a charming romance of Old Sherwood Forest, full of interest to the old and young. The adventures of the bold Robin Hood will never lose their charm, and Mr. Muddock has told them in an entertaining style.

UNCLE BILL'S CHILDREN.

By HELEN MILMAN, author of "Little Ladies," etc. With Illustrations by the author. Small 4to. Cloth, extra, \$1.00.

AN AFFAIR OF HONOUR.

A Book for the Young. With numerous Illustrations. Small 4to. Cloth, gilt, \$1.50.

"In old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now, but yet men are led away from threatening destruction; a hand is put in theirs which leads them forth gently toward a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child's."—*George Eliot*.

BIMBI.

Stories for Children. By LOUISA DE LA RAMÉ ("Ouida"). With Illustrations by EDMUND H. GARRETT. 4to. Cloth, \$1.50.

"The nine stories for children, which 'Ouida' has written for the little Prince of Naples, and published under the title of 'Bimbi,' are the most fascinating little tales imaginable,—pure in thought and purpose, charming in style, with surprising touches of wit, humor, and pathos."—*Boston Traveller*.

For Sale by all Booksellers, or will be sent by the Publishers, free of expense, on receipt of the price. J. B. Lippincott Company, 715 and 717 Market St., Philadelphia.

GENEVIÈVE; OR, THE CHILDREN OF PORT ROYAL.

A story of old France. With illustrations. 12mo. Cloth, \$1.25.

"The story is a sweet one, the spirit that of good-will to all who aspire to holy living, by whatever name they are known. It is well-written and illustrated."—*Boston Literary World*.

"This is a beautifully-written book, vivid and graphic. It takes us back to other days and gives us a transcript of the things in France long ago. It is high-toned, pathetic, and instructive. It is beautifully illustrated, and admirably gotten up in every respect."—*St. Louis Baptist*.

"It tells touchingly and well a story of French life in the days of Pascal and Bossuet. It is profoundly religious, and exhibits fruits of much and careful historical investigation. It is highly interesting, and shows what trials many Christians then had to bear, what peculiar forms of religious devotion were to be seen, and how fidelity to Christ reaps its reward."—*Boston Congregationalist*.


THE MAID OF ORLEANS,

AND THE GREAT WAR OF THE ENGLISH IN FRANCE. By
W. H. DAVENPORT ADAMS, author of "Memorable Battles
in English History." With illustrations. One volume.
12mo. Cloth, \$1.25.

"Both as history and as biography this volume is a valuable one. Mr. Davenport Adams has made a loving and admiring study of Jeanne Darc, commonly known as Joan of Arc. Her humble birth in a cottage at Domremy; her self-dedication, while yet a child, to her country; her heroic labors and adventures, and her cruel death at the stake in Rouen by order of the English Duke of Bedford, are all described with almost painful circumstantiality. Indeed, the concluding chapters are extremely affecting."—*Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*.

"The story is one that must forever touch a responsive chord in the human heart, and it was well worth telling again in this popular and accessible form."—*Philadelphia Times*.

"His book, however, is so much better than any similar sketch of Jeanne Darc prepared for young readers that it can be both commended and recommended."—*Boston Post*.

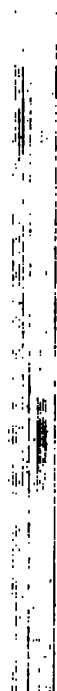
 For sale by all Booksellers, or will be sent, post-paid, on receipt of price.

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY, PUBLISHERS,

715-717 MARKET STREET,

. PHILADELPHIA, PA.





**THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
REFERENCE DEPARTMENT**

**This book is under no circumstances to be
taken from the Building**

